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ISSUE 1
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MONSTRESS
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MONSTRESS

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ISSUE #1

MONSTRESS CREATED BY MARJORIE LIU & SANA TAKEDA

HTTP://MONSTRESS-COMIC.TUMBLR.COM

MONSTRESS™ #1. November 2015. **Published by Image Comics, Inc.** Office of publication: 2001 Center St, Sixth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94704.

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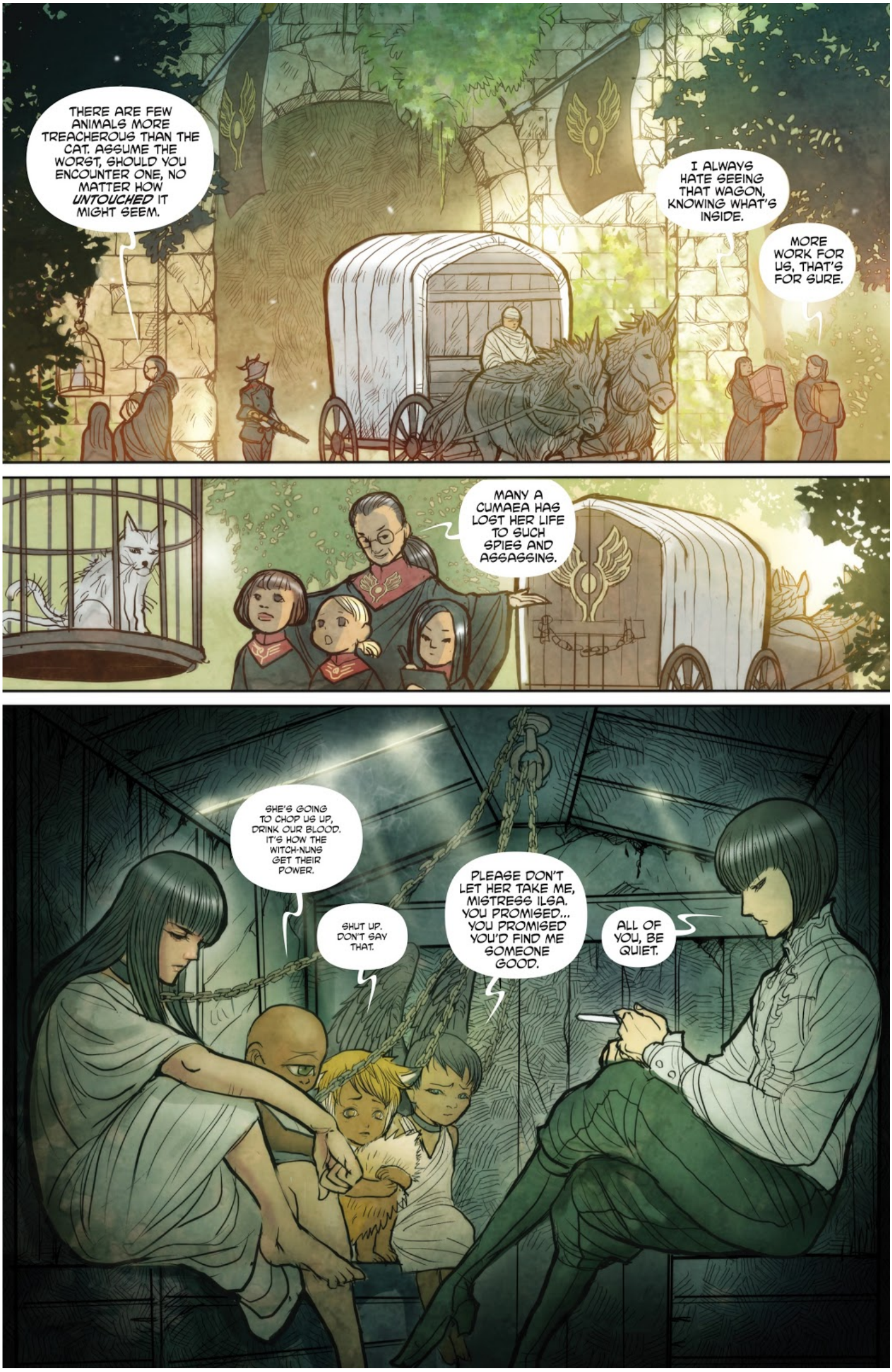
It took three years to find a name. Another two years to find the person.
LADIES AND GENTLEMAN, WE BEGIN OUR EVENING WITH LOT EIGHT-ONE-NINE. ARCANIC, BUT WITH A *FULLY* HUMAN APPEARANCE.
SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD. VIRGIN.
BIDDING WILL START AT FIVE PIECES OF GOLD.
And now I'm here.

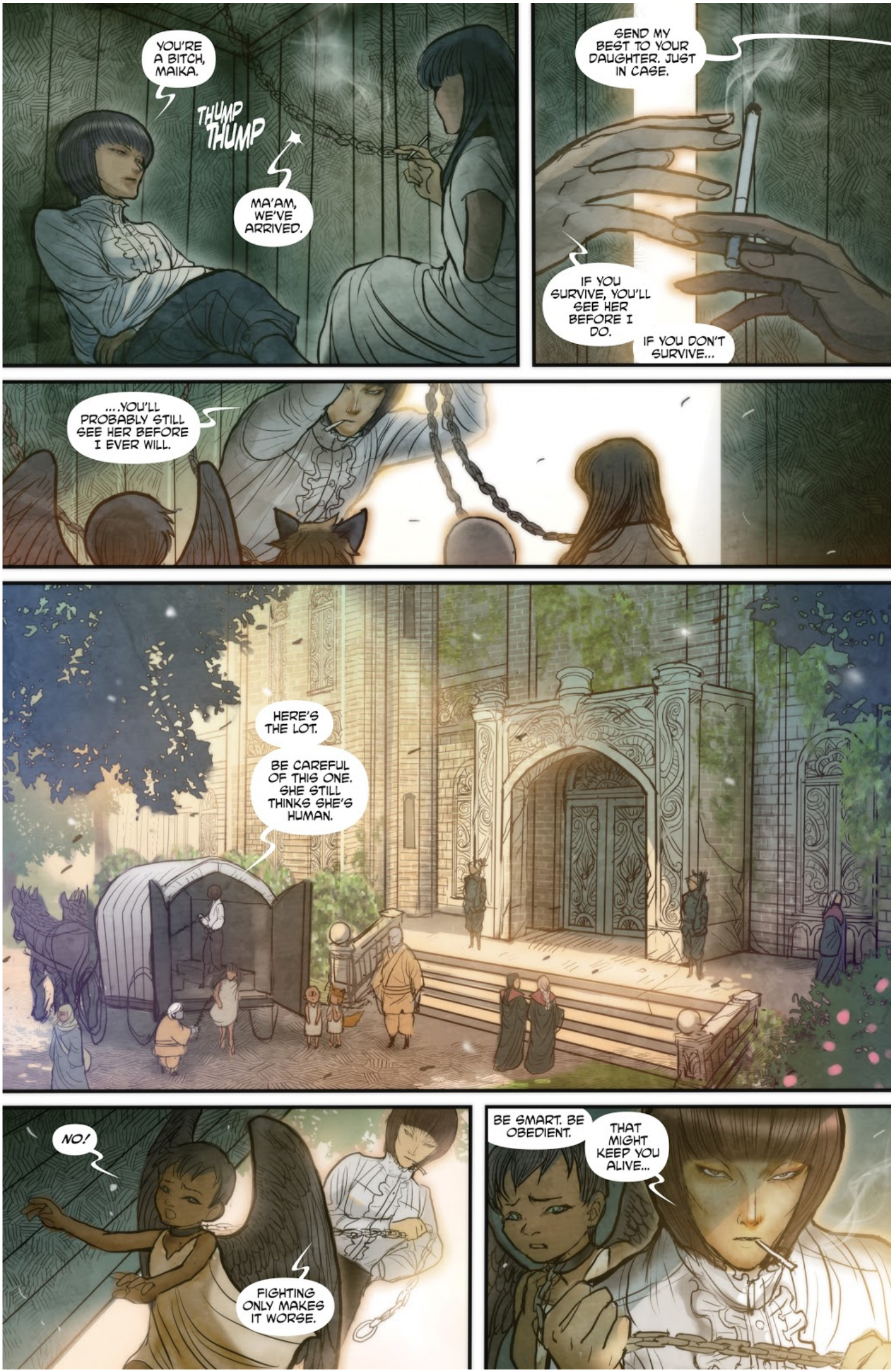
I promised myself I would never be in this position again.
ARE YOU CERTAIN SHE'S AN ARCANIC? WE WOULDN'T WANT TO BUY A HUMAN BY MISTAKE. WE'RE CRIMINALS, NOT SAVAGES.
DON'T BE SILLY, SIR CONROY. WOULD I EVER SELL ONE OF US?
BESIDES, YOU KNOW THAT NOT ALL ARCANICS RESEMBLE MONSTERS. WE PROVIDE SCOPES IF YOU WISH TO CONFIRM.
HMPH.
AND HER MISSING ARM? THAT BRAND? EVEN IF SHE IS A MONSTER, SHE'S DEFORMED.
I thought I'd rather die.
NO HUMAN HOUSE DESIGNED THAT BRAND, SIR CONROY. HER OWN PEOPLE MARKED HER. A BARBARIAN RITUAL.
AS FOR HER ARM? YES, IT'S UNSIGHTLY. NOT THAT MOST OF YOU STILL HAVE ALL YOUR LIMBS.
THE WAR TOOK ITS TOLL. FOR BOTH SIDES.
AND YET, LOOK AT HER FACE. WILD BEAUTY, FOR YOUR WILD TASTES.
I was wrong.
Tuya says I've lost my mind.
SO, SHALL WE COMMENCE WITH THE BIDDING?
NO.
WE SHALL NOT.
I wish I could tell her...

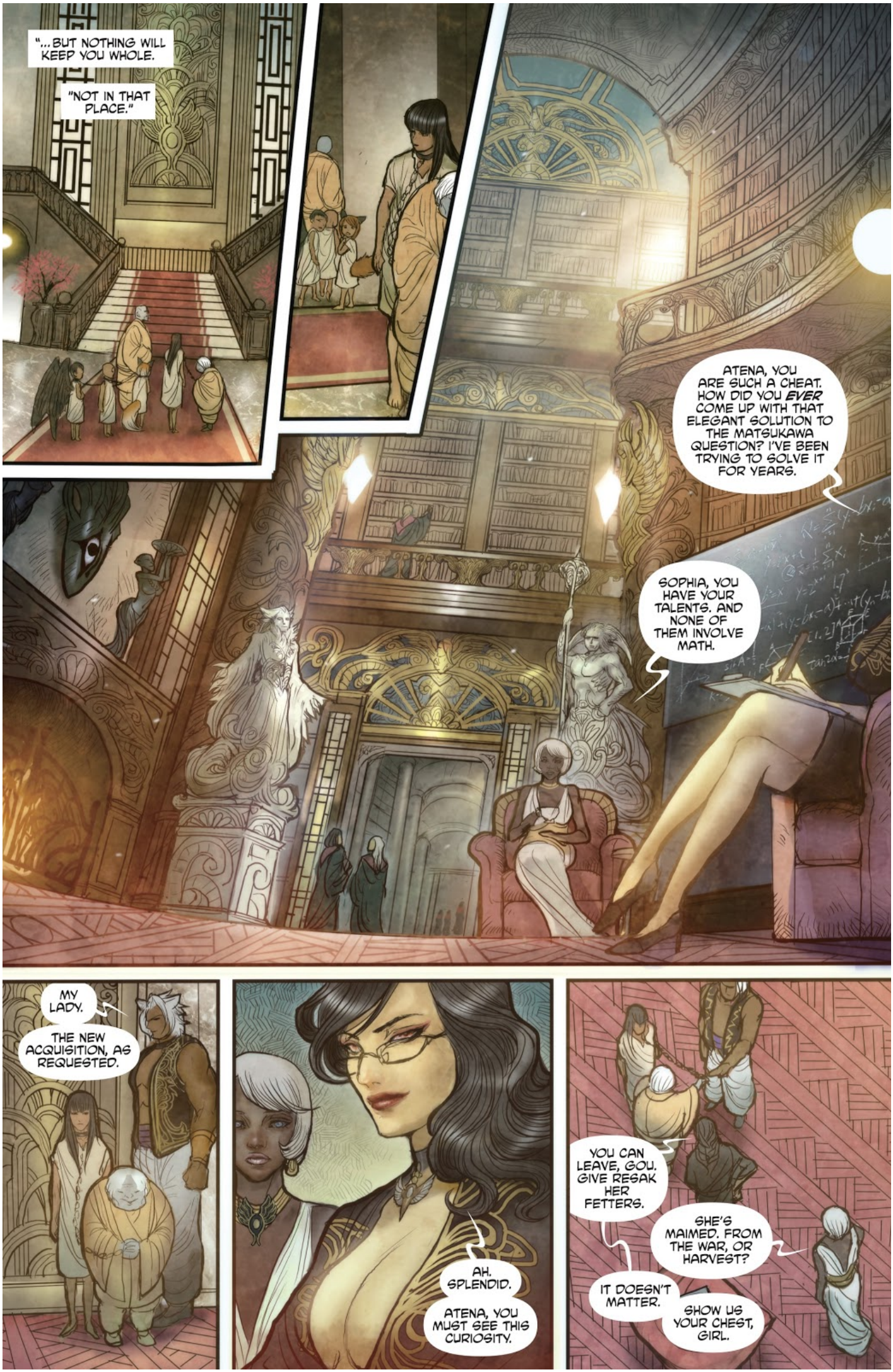
...that's exactly what I'm trying to prevent.
MY LADY.
HOW MAY I SERVE THE CUMAEA?
YOU MAY DONATE THIS ARCANIC TO OUR ORDER.
AND THE FOX CUB, THE CYCLOPEAN FREAK, AND THE STUBBY ONE WITH THOSE USELESS WINGS.
OF COURSE, MY LADY.
...CORRUPT... *ARROGANT* NUNS... THINKING THEY RULE US...THIS IS NEUTRAL TERRITORY, GODDAMMIT....
SIR CONROY.
TWO MONTHS FROM NOW, YOUR WIFE IS GOING TO FIND YOU IN BED WITH ANOTHER MAN.
SOON AFTER YOU'LL BE FOUND STONE COLD DEAD. CURIOUSLY, NO ONE WILL BE CHARGED.
REFLECT ON *THAT.*
ILSA? HAVE THE ARCANICS SENT TO MY LAB AT THE CUMAEA COMPOUND.
AS YOU WISH, MY LADY.

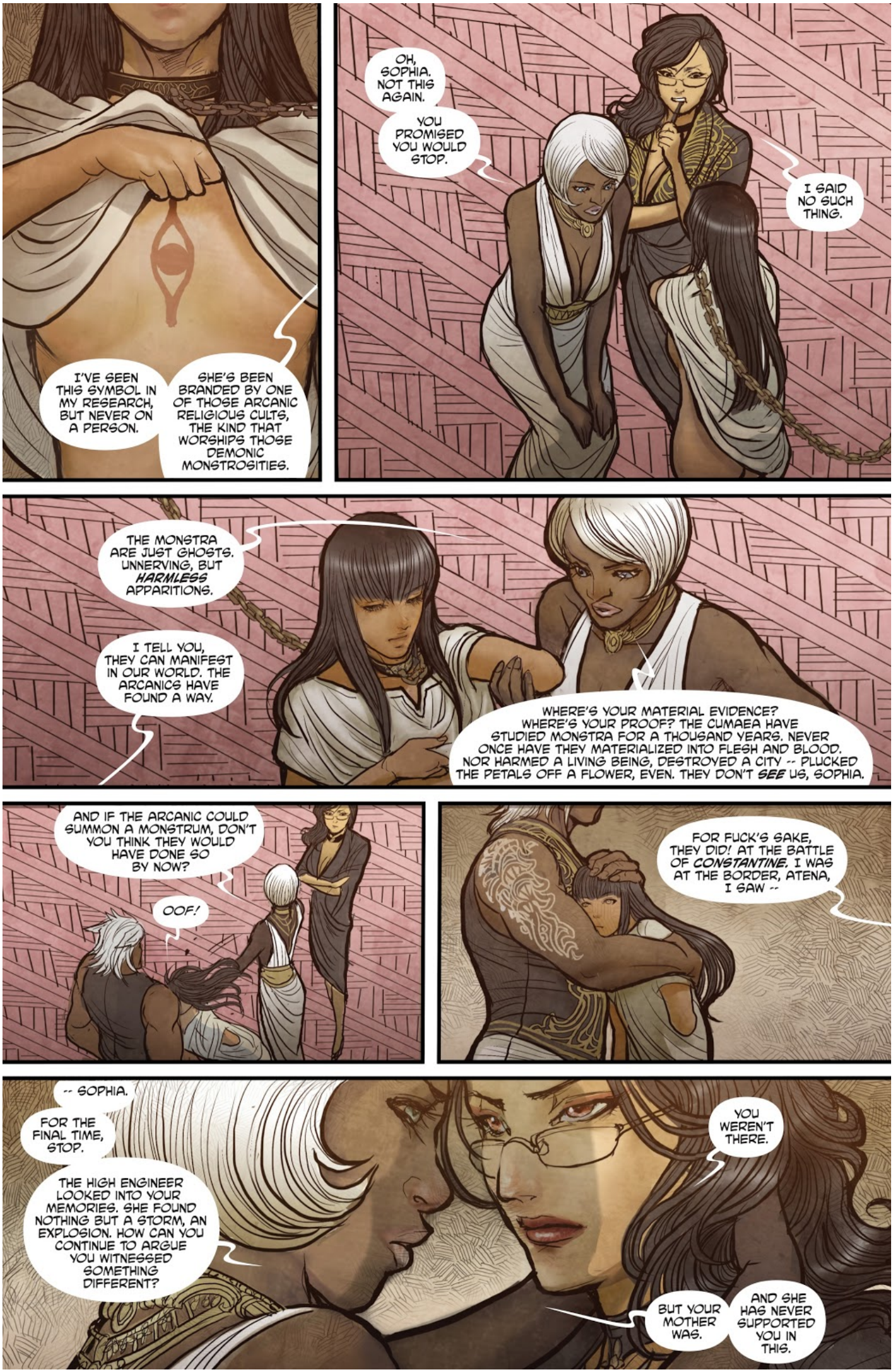
CITY OF ZAMORA.
So much was destroyed during the war.
And yet some cities rebuilt themselves... as if nothing happened.
Too bad people don't rebuild themselves so easily.
Only five years.
I've forgotten so much already.
I can't afford to forget the blood.
Or who spilled it.
COME, COME... YOU CUMAEA HIDE IN YOUR OUTPOST LIKE BANDITS! AT LEAST SPREAD SOME COIN AROUND.

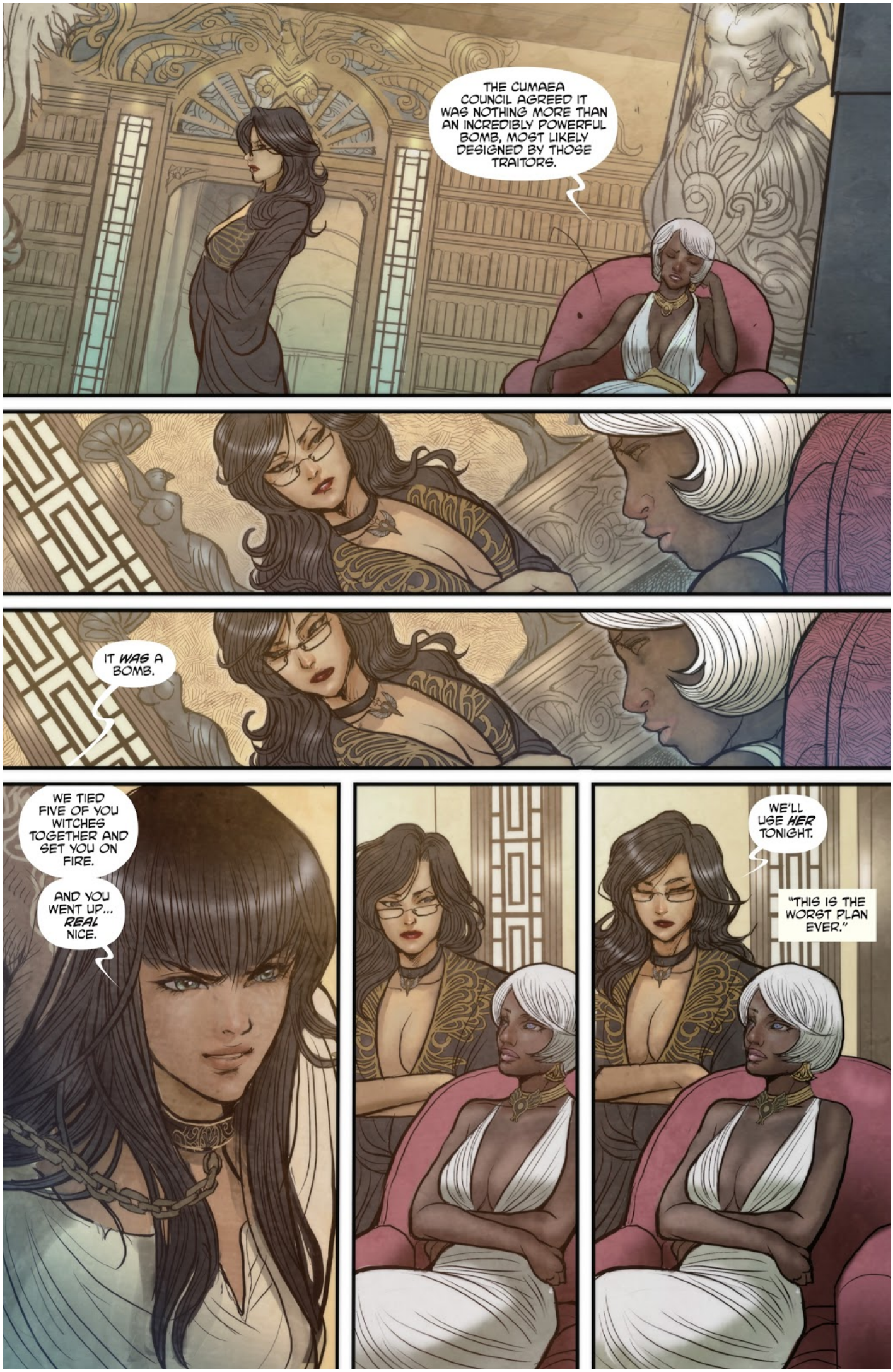

THERE ARE FEW ANIMALS MORE TREACHEROUS THAN THE CAT. ASSUME THE WORST, SHOULD YOU ENCOUNTER ONE, NO MATTER HOW *UNTOUCHED* IT MIGHT SEEM.
I ALWAYS HATE SEEING THAT WAGON, KNOWING WHAT'S INSIDE.
MORE WORK FOR US, THAT'S FOR SURE.
MANY A CUMAEA HAS LOST HER LIFE TO SUCH SPIES AND ASSASSINS.
SHE'S GOING TO CHOP US UP, DRINK OUR BLOOD. IT'S HOW THE WITCH-NUNS GET THEIR POWER.
SHUT UP. DON'T SAY THAT.
PLEASE DON'T LET HER TAKE ME, MISTRESS ILSA. YOU PROMISED... YOU PROMISED YOU'D FIND ME SOMEONE GOOD.
ALL OF YOU, BE QUIET.

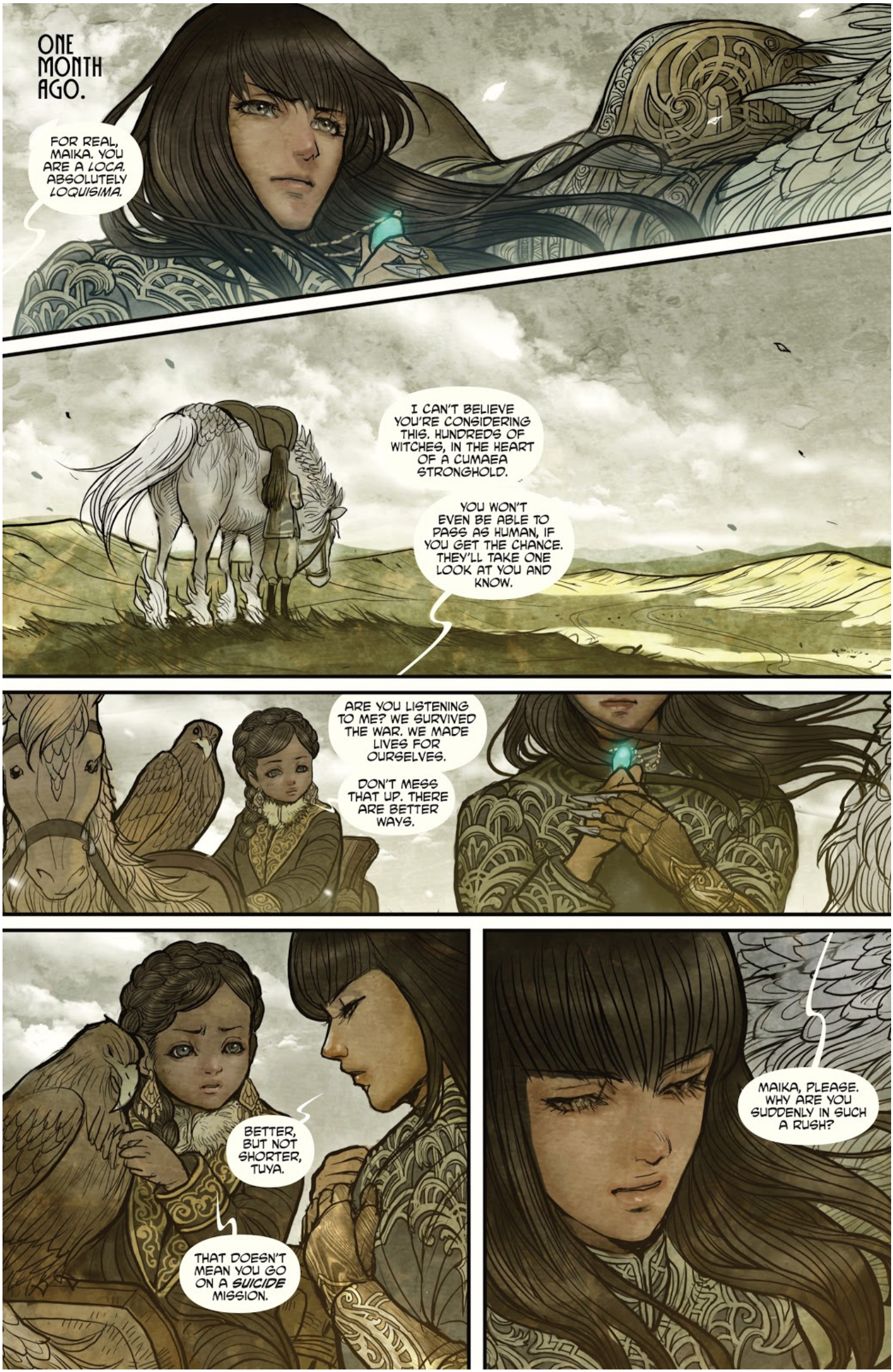
WHAT, NO CRYING?
GOOD. SHE LIKES THEM BRAVE.
IS THAT WHY YOU ONLY DEAL IN CHILDREN?
WATCH YOUR FUCKING MOUTH. YOU'RE A SLAVE. AN ANIMAL PIECE OF SHIT ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE WALL. IF THERE WEREN'T A STALEMATE IN THE WAR, THERE WOULDN'T EVEN BE A WALL AND ALL YOU INHUMAN FREAKS WOULD BE IN CHAINS.
SHE'S GOING TO KILL YOU. EVEN AMONG THE CUMAEA, SOPHIA FEKETE IS KNOWN FOR HER KNIVES.
YES.
I NEVER WANT TO SEE THOSE KNIVES.
THAT'S YOUR CHOICE, ILSA.

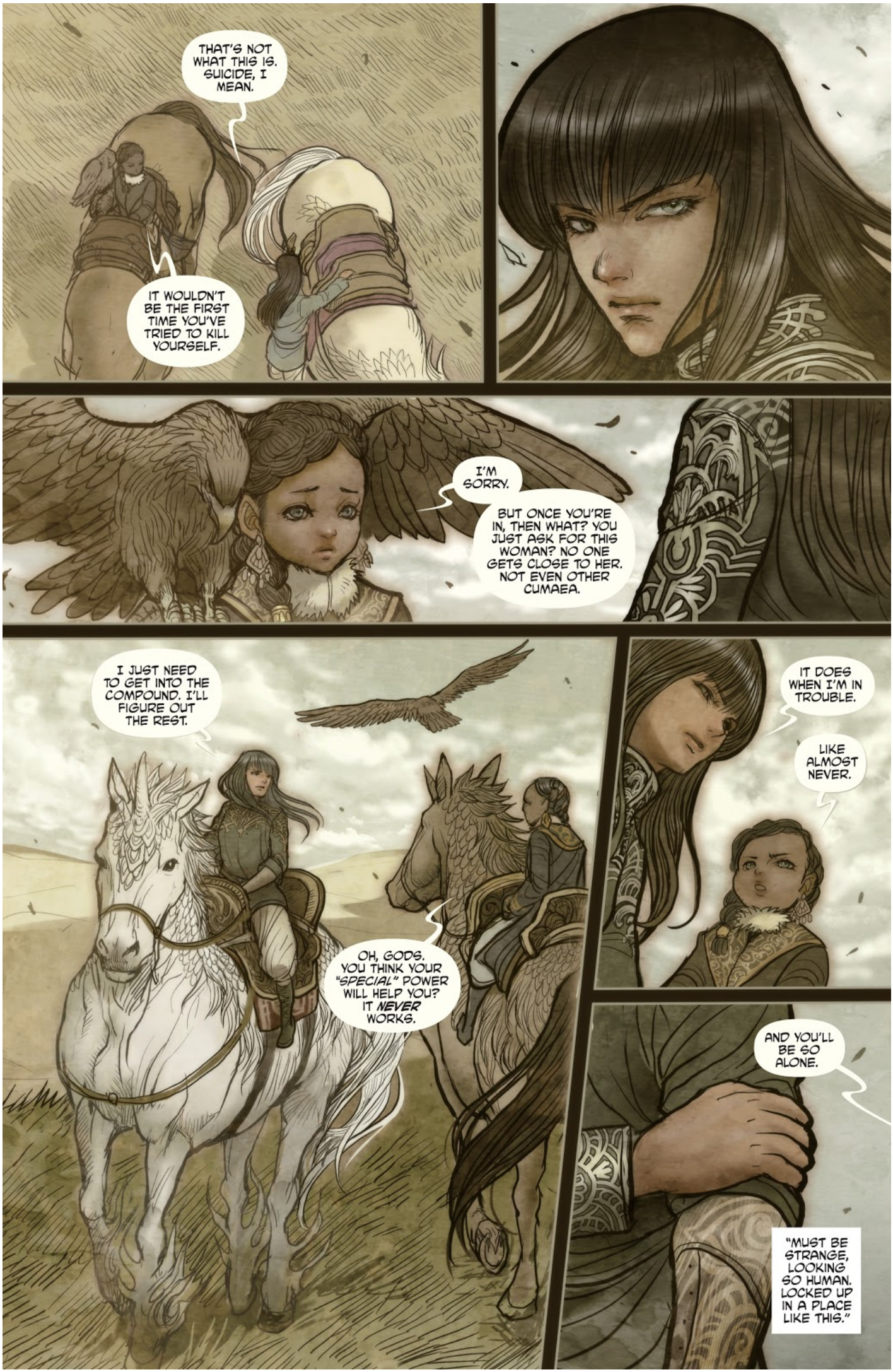

YOU'RE A BITCH, MAIKA.
THUMP THUMP
MA'AM, WE'VE ARRIVED.
SEND MY BEST TO YOUR DAUGHTER. JUST IN CASE.
IF YOU SURVIVE, YOU'LL SEE HER BEFORE I DO.
IF YOU DON'T SURVIVE...
....YOU'LL PROBABLY STILL SEE HER BEFORE I EVER WILL.
HERE'S THE LOT.
BE CAREFUL OF THIS ONE. SHE STILL THINKS SHE'S HUMAN.
NO!
FIGHTING ONLY MAKES IT WORSE.
BE SMART. BE OBEDIENT.
THAT MIGHT KEEP YOU ALIVE...


"...BUT NOTHING WILL KEEP YOU WHOLE.
"NOT IN THAT PLACE."
ATENA, YOU ARE SUCH A CHEAT. HOW DID YOU *EVER* COME UP WITH THAT ELEGANT SOLUTION TO THE MATSUKAWA QUESTION? I'VE BEEN TRYING TO SOLVE IT FOR YEARS.
SOPHIA, YOU HAVE YOUR TALENTS. AND NONE OF THEM INVOLVE MATH.
MY LADY.
THE NEW ACQUISITION, AS REQUESTED.
AH. SPLENDID.
ATENA, YOU MUST SEE THIS CURIOSITY.
YOU CAN LEAVE, GOU. GIVE RESAK HER FETTERS.
SHE'S MAIMED. FROM THE WAR, OR HARVEST?
IT DOESN'T MATTER.
SHOW US YOUR CHEST, GIRL.

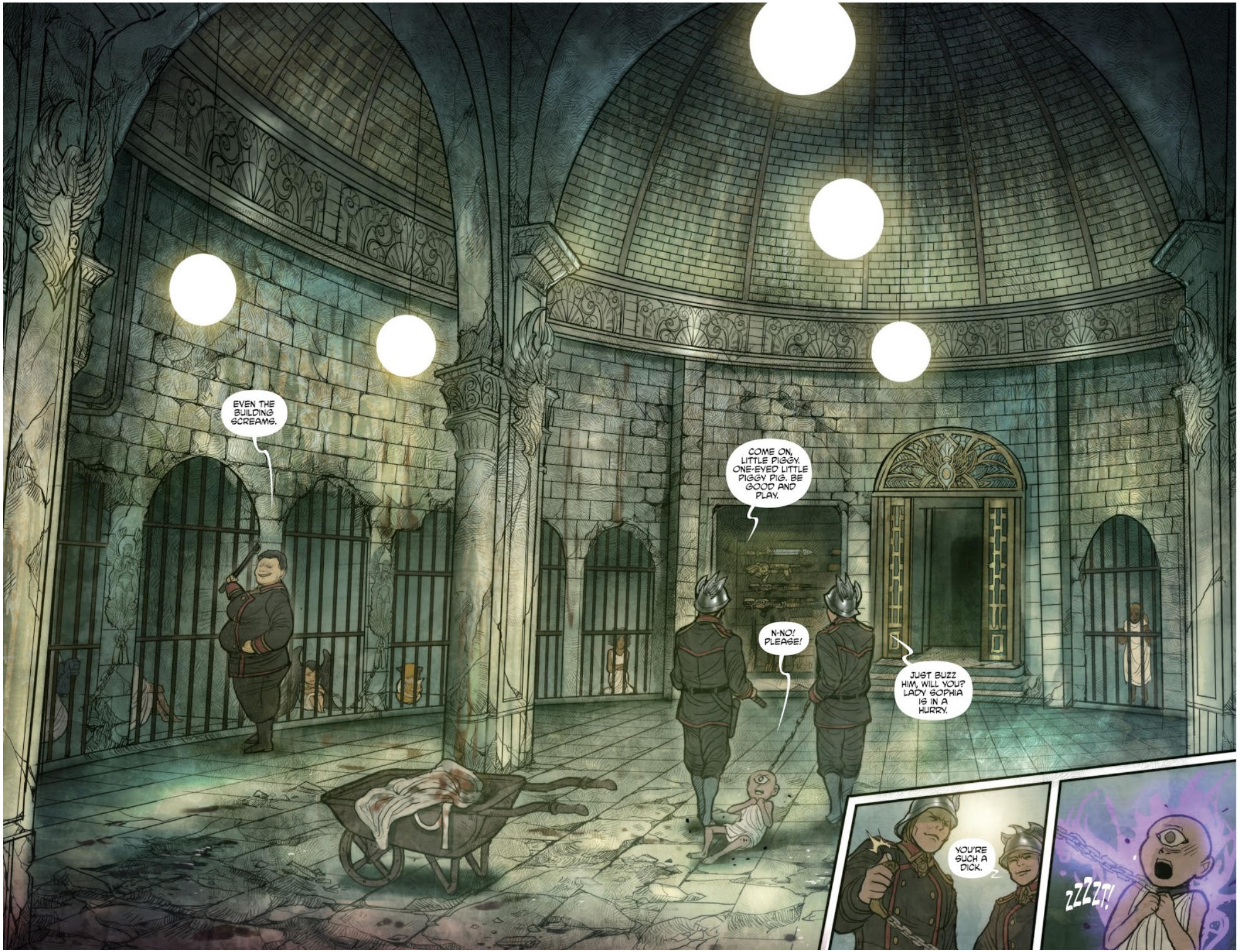

I'VE SEEN THIS SYMBOL IN MY RESEARCH, BUT NEVER ON A PERSON.
SHE'S BEEN BRANDED BY ONE OF THOSE ARCANIC RELIGIOUS CULTS, THE KIND THAT WORSHIPS THOSE DEMONIC MONSTROSITIES.
OH, SOPHIA. NOT THIS AGAIN.
YOU PROMISED YOU WOULD STOP.
I SAID NO SUCH THING.
THE MONSTRA ARE JUST GHOSTS. UNNERVING, BUT *HARMLESS* APPARITIONS.
I TELL YOU, THEY CAN MANIFEST IN OUR WORLD. THE ARCANICS HAVE FOUND A WAY.
WHERE'S YOUR MATERIAL EVIDENCE? WHERE'S YOUR PROOF? THE CUMAEA HAVE STUDIED MONSTRA FOR A THOUSAND YEARS. NEVER ONCE HAVE THEY MATERIALIZED INTO FLESH AND BLOOD. NOR HARMED A LIVING BEING, DESTROYED A CITY -- PLUCKED THE PETALS OFF A FLOWER, EVEN. THEY DON'T *SEE* US, SOPHIA.
AND IF THE ARCANIC COULD SUMMON A MONSTRUM, DON'T YOU THINK THEY WOULD HAVE DONE SO BY NOW?
OOF!
FOR FUCK'S SAKE, THEY DID! AT THE BATTLE OF *CONSTANTINE*. I WAS AT THE BORDER, ATENA, I SAW --
-- SOPHIA.
FOR THE FINAL TIME, STOP.
THE HIGH ENGINEER LOOKED INTO YOUR MEMORIES. SHE FOUND NOTHING BUT A STORM, AN EXPLOSION. HOW CAN YOU CONTINUE TO ARGUE YOU WITNESSED SOMETHING DIFFERENT?
YOU WEREN'T THERE.
BUT YOUR MOTHER WAS.
AND SHE HAS NEVER SUPPORTED YOU IN THIS.


THE CUMAEA COUNCIL AGREED IT WAS NOTHING MORE THAN AN INCREDIBLY POWERFUL BOMB, MOST LIKELY DESIGNED BY THOSE TRAITORS.
IT *WAS* A BOMB.
WE TIED FIVE OF YOU WITCHES TOGETHER AND SET YOU ON FIRE.
AND YOU WENT UP... *REAL* NICE.
WE'LL USE *HER* TONIGHT.
"THIS IS THE WORST PLAN EVER."


ONE MONTH AGO.
FOR REAL, MAIKA. YOU ARE A *LOCA*, ABSOLUTELY *LOQUISIMA*.
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE CONSIDERING THIS. HUNDREDS OF WITCHES, IN THE HEART OF A CUMAEA STRONGHOLD.
YOU WON'T EVEN BE ABLE TO PASS AS HUMAN, IF YOU GET THE CHANCE. THEY'LL TAKE ONE LOOK AT YOU AND KNOW.
ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME? WE SURVIVED THE WAR. WE MADE LIVES FOR OURSELVES.
DON'T MESS THAT UP. THERE ARE BETTER WAYS.
BETTER, BUT NOT SHORTER, TUYA.
THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU GO ON A *SUICIDE* MISSION.
MAIKA, PLEASE. WHY ARE YOU SUDDENLY IN SUCH A RUSH?


THAT'S NOT WHAT THIS IS. SUICIDE, I MEAN.
IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE TRIED TO KILL YOURSELF.
I'M SORRY.
BUT ONCE YOU'RE IN, THEN WHAT? YOU JUST ASK FOR THIS WOMAN? NO ONE GETS CLOSE TO HER. NOT EVEN OTHER CUMAEA.
I JUST NEED TO GET INTO THE COMPOUND. I'LL FIGURE OUT THE REST.
OH, GODS. YOU THINK YOUR "SPECIAL" POWER WILL HELP YOU? IT NEVER WORKS.
IT DOES WHEN I'M IN TROUBLE.
LIKE ALMOST NEVER.
AND YOU'LL BE SO ALONE.
"MUST BE STRANGE, LOOKING SO HUMAN. LOCKED UP IN A PLACE LIKE THIS."

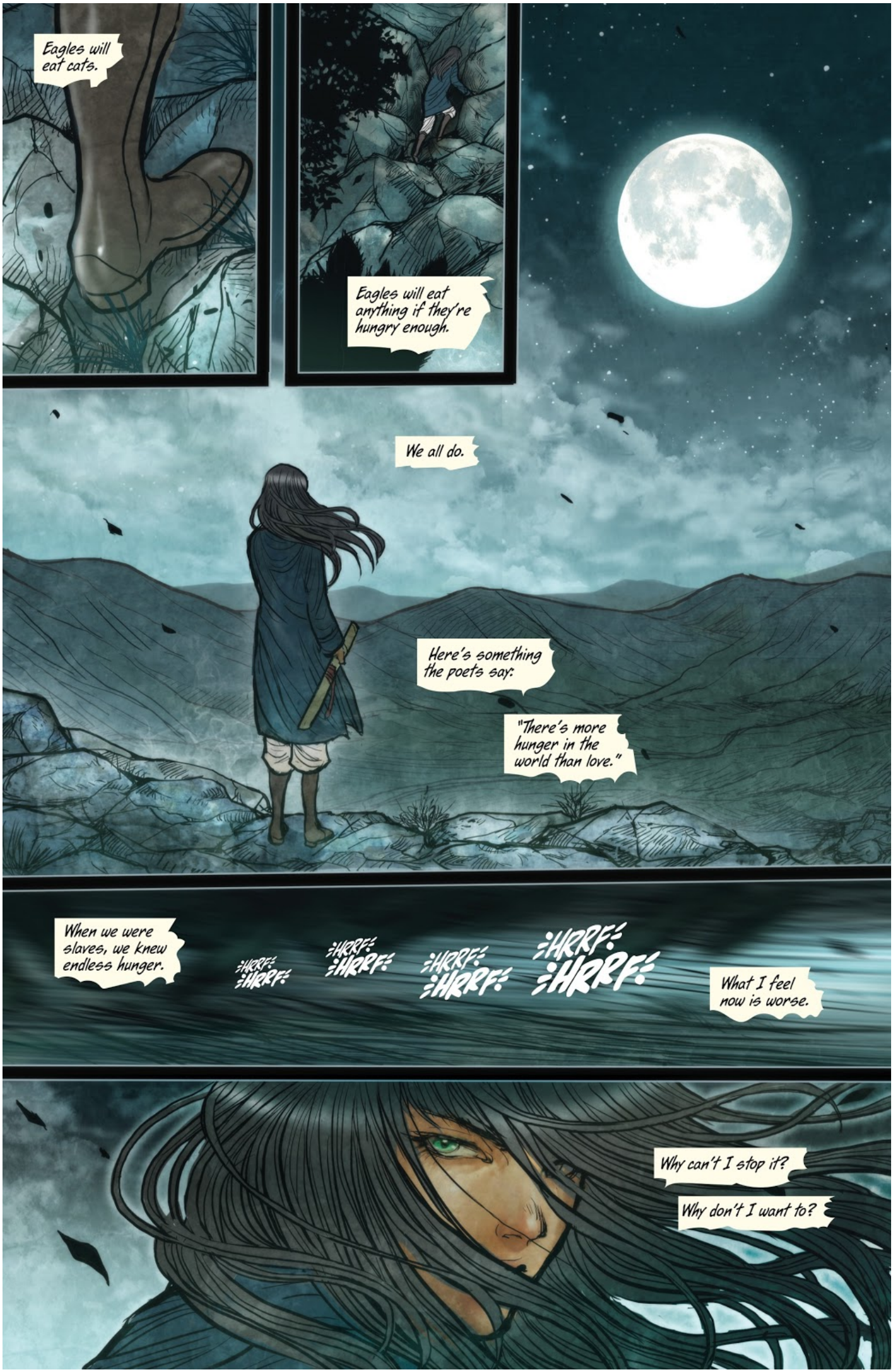
CA-CLINK CA-CLINK
ALWAYS THANKED THE GOOD MARIUM MY BLOOD TESTED PURE.
CA-CLINK CA-CLINK
BUT I SUPPOSE YOU ALREADY RECONCILED YOURSELF TO BEING AN ANIMAL. MUST HAVE HURT WHEN THAT ARM CAME OFF.
CA-CLINK CA-CLINK
I WONDER WHAT YOU'LL LOSE THIS TIME?
I CAN'T WAIT TO FIND OUT.
ZZZZT ZZZZT
AH, HERE WE GO. LADY SOPHIA HAS STARTED.
ZZZZT ZZZZT
I LOVE THESE MOMENTS.


EVEN THE BUILDING SCREAMS.
COME ON, LITTLE PIGGY. ONE-EYED LITTLE PIGGY PIG. BE GOOD AND PLAY.
N-NO! PLEASE!
JUST BUZZ HIM, WILL YOU? LADY SOPHIA IS IN A HURRY.
YOU'RE SUCH A DICK.
ZZZZT!

YOU LIKE TO TALK.
WITH THOSE WHO CAN. YOU KNOW SOME OF YOUR KIND DON'T SPEAK HUMAN TOO WELL.
UNNH! UNNH!
NOTHING BUT THOSE RUTTING GRUNTS.
SOMETIMES I FUCK THEM WITH THIS CATTLE PROD SO THEY MAKE A BETTER SOUND.
MAYBE YOU'LL MAKE THAT SOUND.
GET READY.
YOUR NIGHT IS GOING TO BE VERY LONG.
OPEN.

ONE MONTH AGO.
OPEN.
OPEN.
WILL YOU JUST STOP?
NO. I WON'T.
THEY'RE GOING TO PUT A COLLAR ON YOU.
YOU REMEMBER WHAT THAT WAS LIKE, DON'T YOU?
THIS IS DIFFERENT. LIKE CONSTANTINE. YOU REMEMBER *THAT,* DON'T YOU?
ALL I KNOW IS THAT I WASTED A BUNCH OF MONEY ON A LOCK YOU CAN'T OPEN, EVEN AFTER A WEEK OF STARING AT IT.

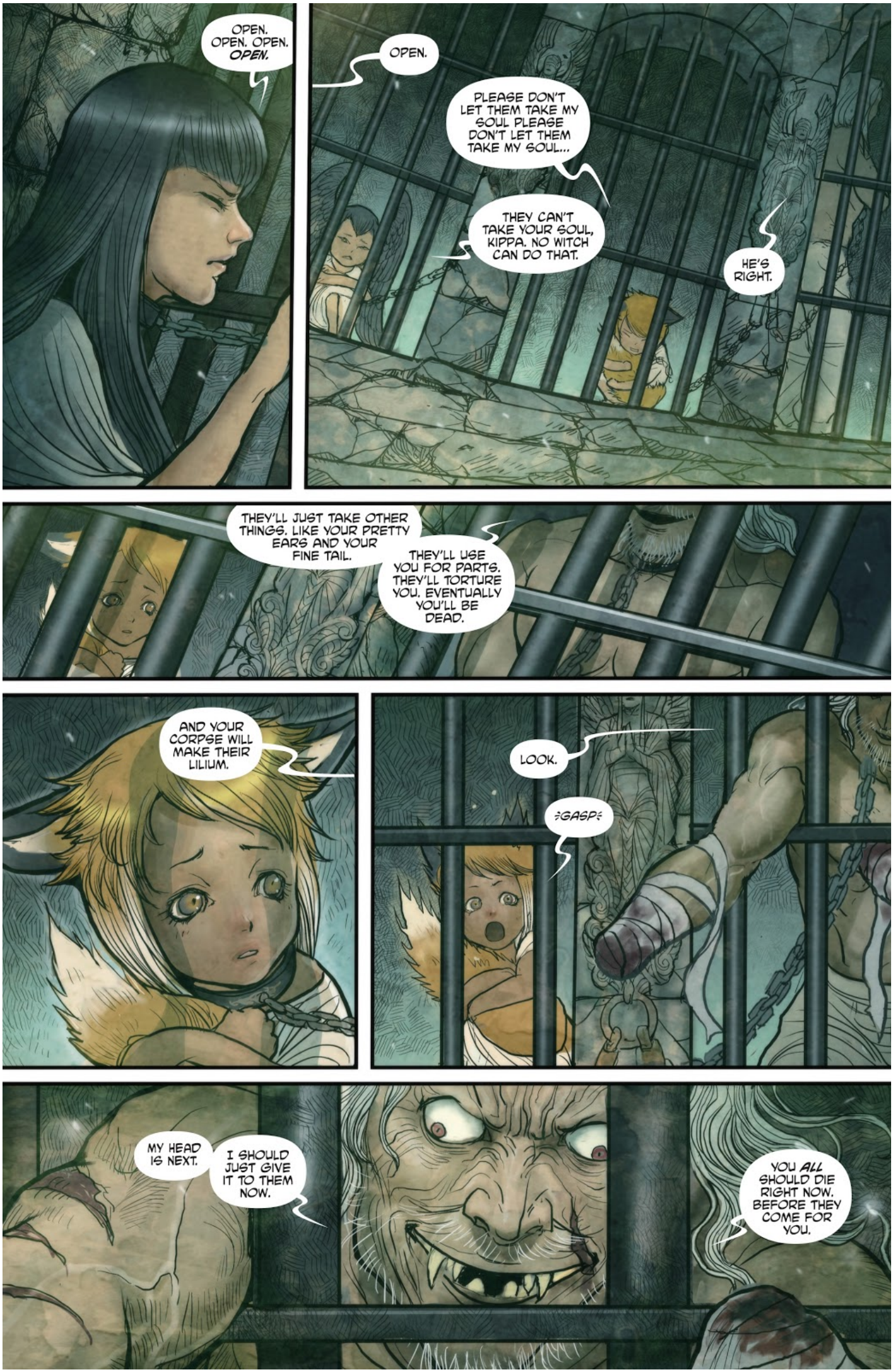
YOUR PLAN SEEMS ILL-ADVISED, YOUNG MAIKA.
FEW ESCAPE THE CUMAEA. I KNOW THAT PERSONALLY.
TO QUOTE THE POETS--
I DON'T LIKE POETRY.
LIAR.
STOP FOLLOWING US. I DON'T LIKE STRANGE CATS. I NEVER KNOW WHAT YOUR KIND WANT.
MAYBE ORPHANS SEEK OTHER ORPHANS. MAYBE THE NIGHT IS COLD. MAYBE WE ARE ALL REFUGEES.
OR MAYBE I JUST LIKE A MYSTERY.
YOU TALK TOO MUCH. GO AWAY. OR ELSE I'LL HAVE TUYA SET HER EAGLE ON YOU.
EAGLES DON'T EAT CATS.


Eagles will eat cats.
Eagles will eat anything if they're hungry enough.
We all do.
Here's something the poets say:
"There's more hunger in the world than love."
When we were slaves, we knew endless hunger.
HRRF
HRRF
HRRF
HRRF
HRRF
HRRF
What I feel now is worse.
Why can't I stop it?
Why don't I want to?

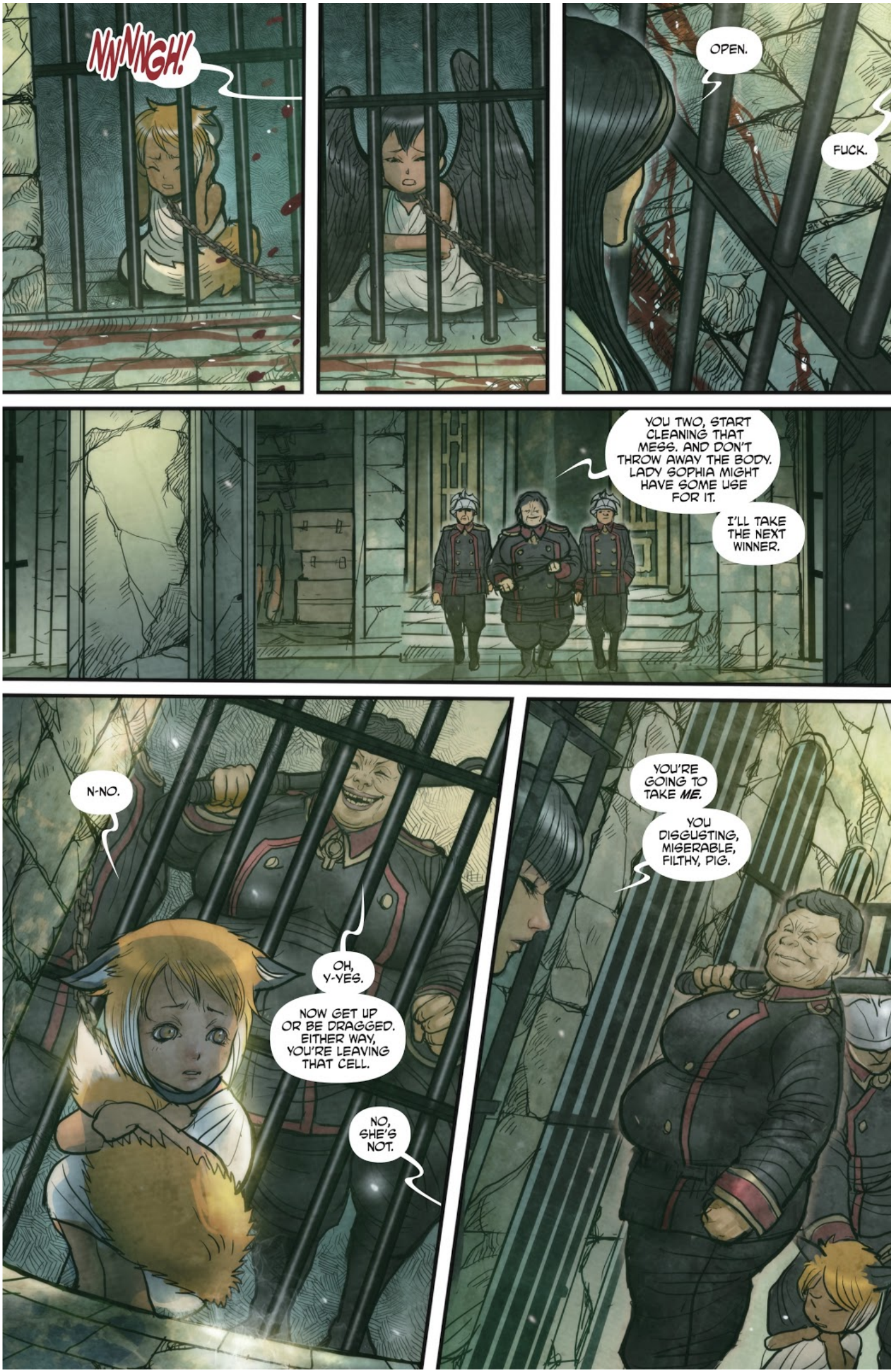
GRRRRRRRR
RRRGRROWWW
SNRFF
HRFF
GRROFF
IRFF!
HRNN
RNNN
RNNN
LOOK AT YOU...
SO... RED...

DON'T...
HRRF HRRF
HRRF HRRF
HRRF HRRF
HRRF HRRF
HRRF HRRF
HRRF HRRF
..DON'T...
...RUN...

When we were slaves and starving, we once ate the contents of a dead boy's stomach.
We said it wasn't like eating the boy.
But now I know the truth.
It was.
"OPEN."
"COME ON... OPEN."


OPEN. OPEN. OPEN. OPEN.
OPEN.
PLEASE DON'T LET THEM TAKE MY SOUL PLEASE DON'T LET THEM TAKE MY SOUL...
THEY CAN'T TAKE YOUR SOUL, KIPPA. NO WITCH CAN DO THAT.
HE'S RIGHT.
THEY'LL JUST TAKE OTHER THINGS. LIKE YOUR PRETTY EARS AND YOUR FINE TAIL.
THEY'LL USE YOU FOR PARTS. THEY'LL TORTURE YOU. EVENTUALLY YOU'LL BE DEAD.
AND YOUR CORPSE WILL MAKE THEIR LILIUM.
LOOK.
:GASP:
MY HEAD IS NEXT.
I SHOULD JUST GIVE IT TO THEM NOW.
YOU ALL SHOULD DIE RIGHT NOW. BEFORE THEY COME FOR YOU.

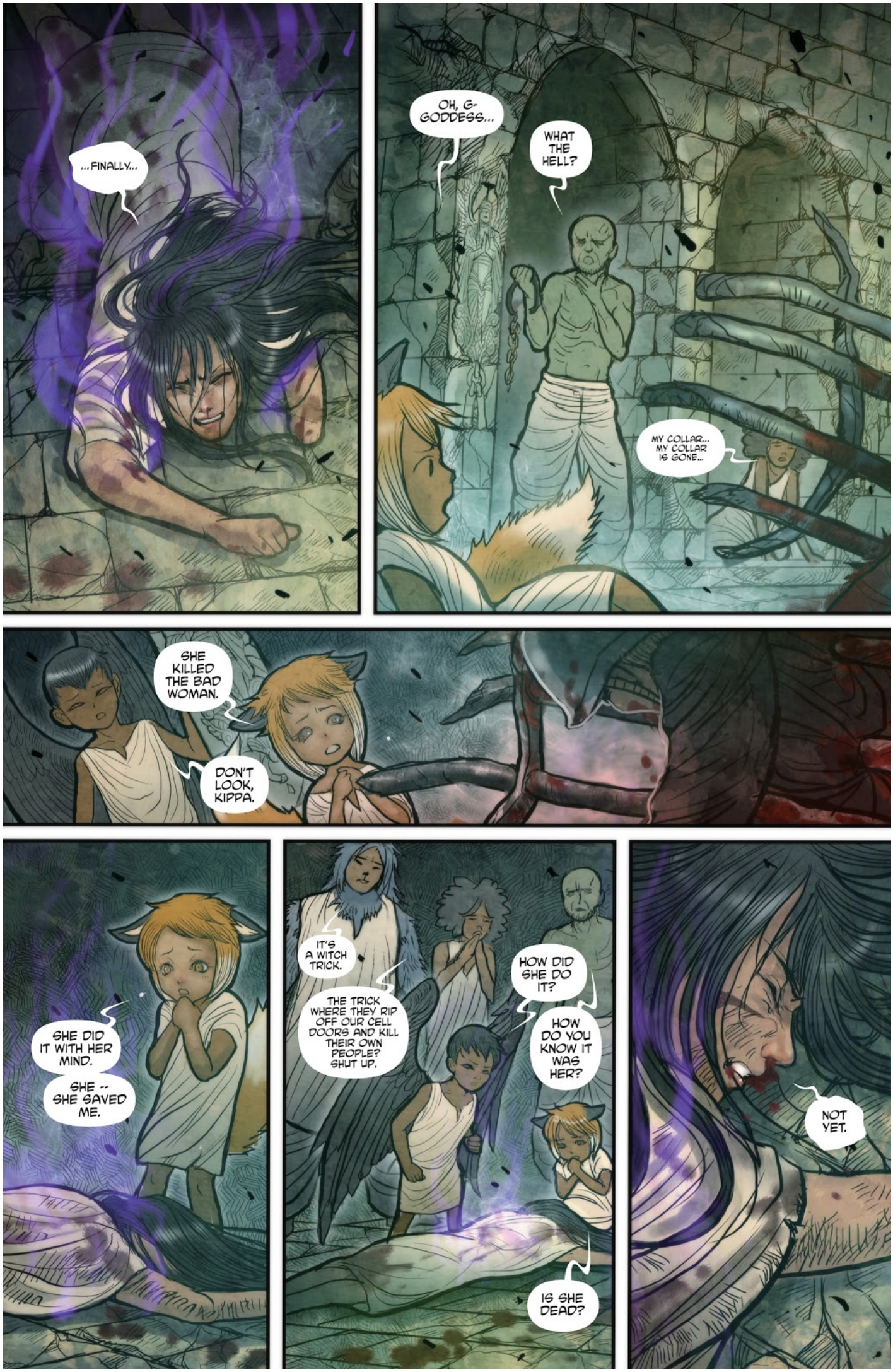
DON'T LISTEN TO HIM.
NO, LISTEN. LISTEN.
I'LL DO IT FOR YOU. I'LL SAVE YOU.
I'LL BREAK THESE BARS AND TAKE YOUR HEAD BEFORE THEY CAN.
I'M STRONG. I'LL SAVE --
-- ƎNNNGH!Ɛ -- YOU.
-- ƎNNNGH!Ɛ -- I'LL SAVE --
-- ƎNNNGH!Ɛ
-- ƎNNNGH!Ɛ
NO, STOP!
STOP!
-- ƎNNNGH!Ɛ
LITTLE FOX AND BIRD. KEEP YOUR EARS COVERED.

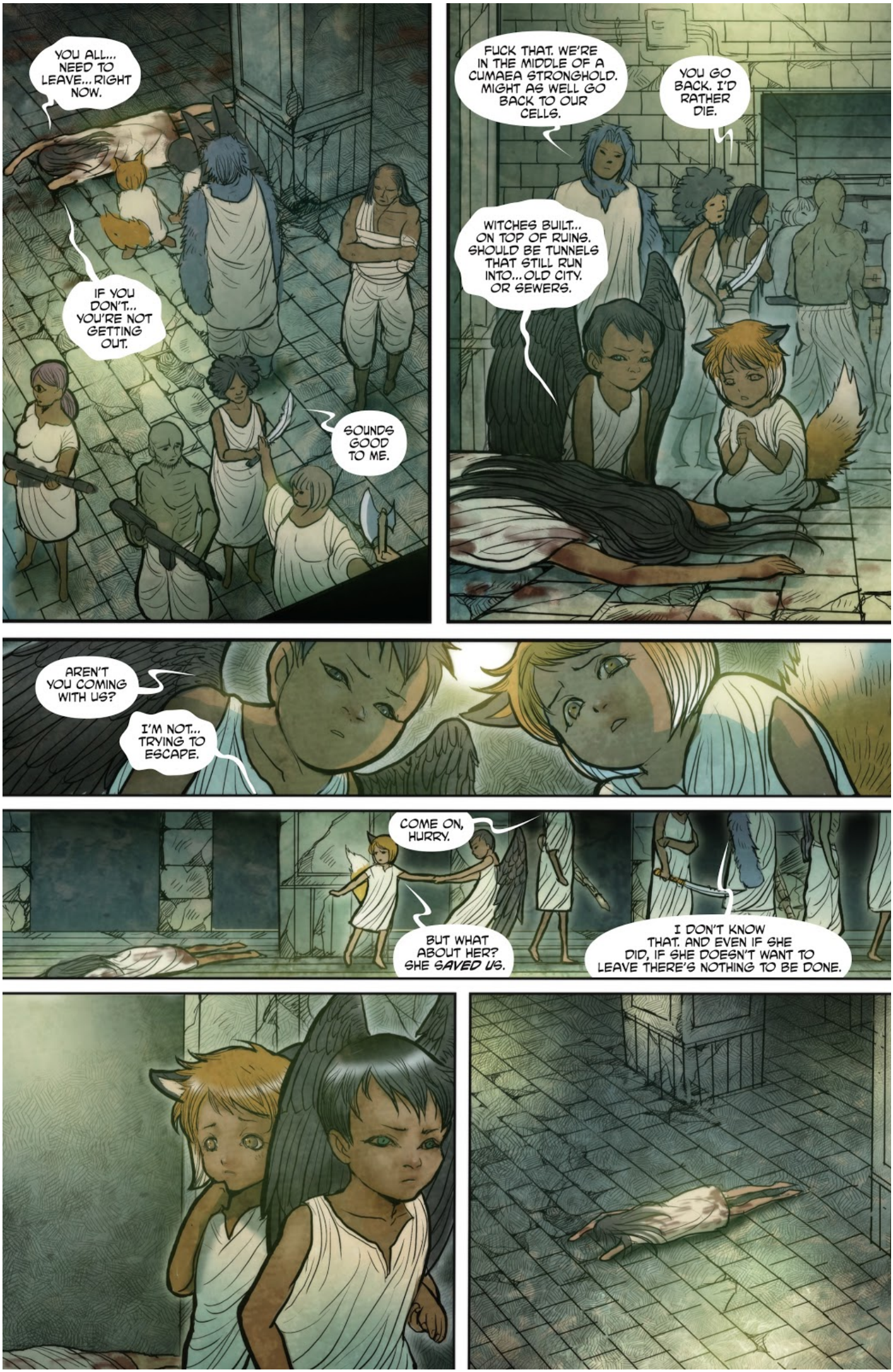

NNNGH!
OPEN.
FUCK.
YOU TWO, START CLEANING THAT MESS. AND DON'T THROW AWAY THE BODY. LADY SOPHIA MIGHT HAVE SOME USE FOR IT.
I'LL TAKE THE NEXT WINNER.
N-NO.
OH, Y-YES.
NOW GET UP OR BE DRAGGED. EITHER WAY, YOU'RE LEAVING THAT CELL.
NO, SHE'S NOT.
YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE *ME.*
YOU DISGUSTING, MISERABLE, FILTHY, PIG.

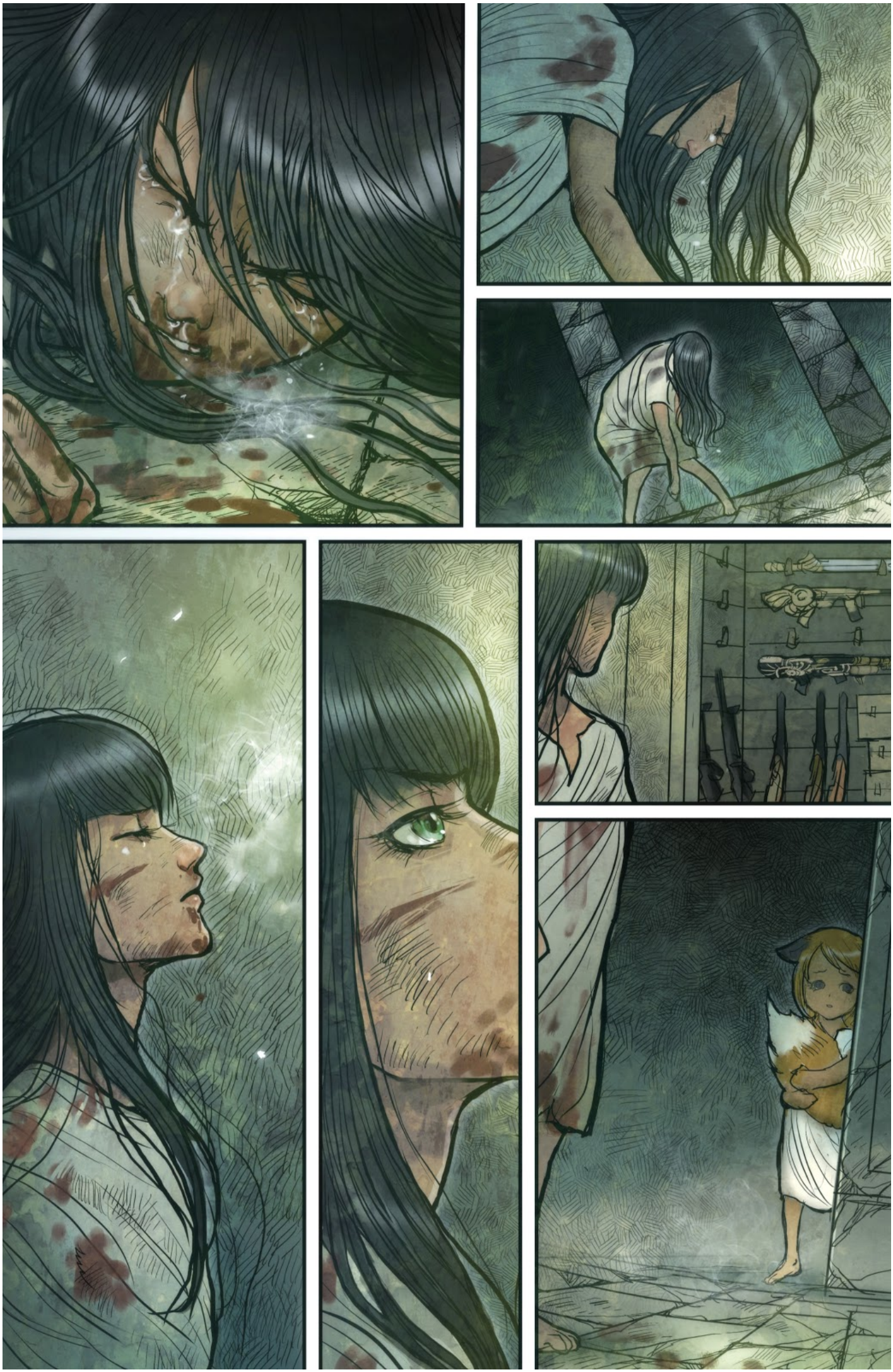
CHANGE OF PLANS, BOYS. BRING THE FOX TO LADY SOPHIA.
I HAVE OTHER WORK TO DO.
AAAAAAHAHAHH!
ZZZZRRTT
NNNGGGH...
HEH. LET'S HEAR YOU MOUTH OFF AGAIN.

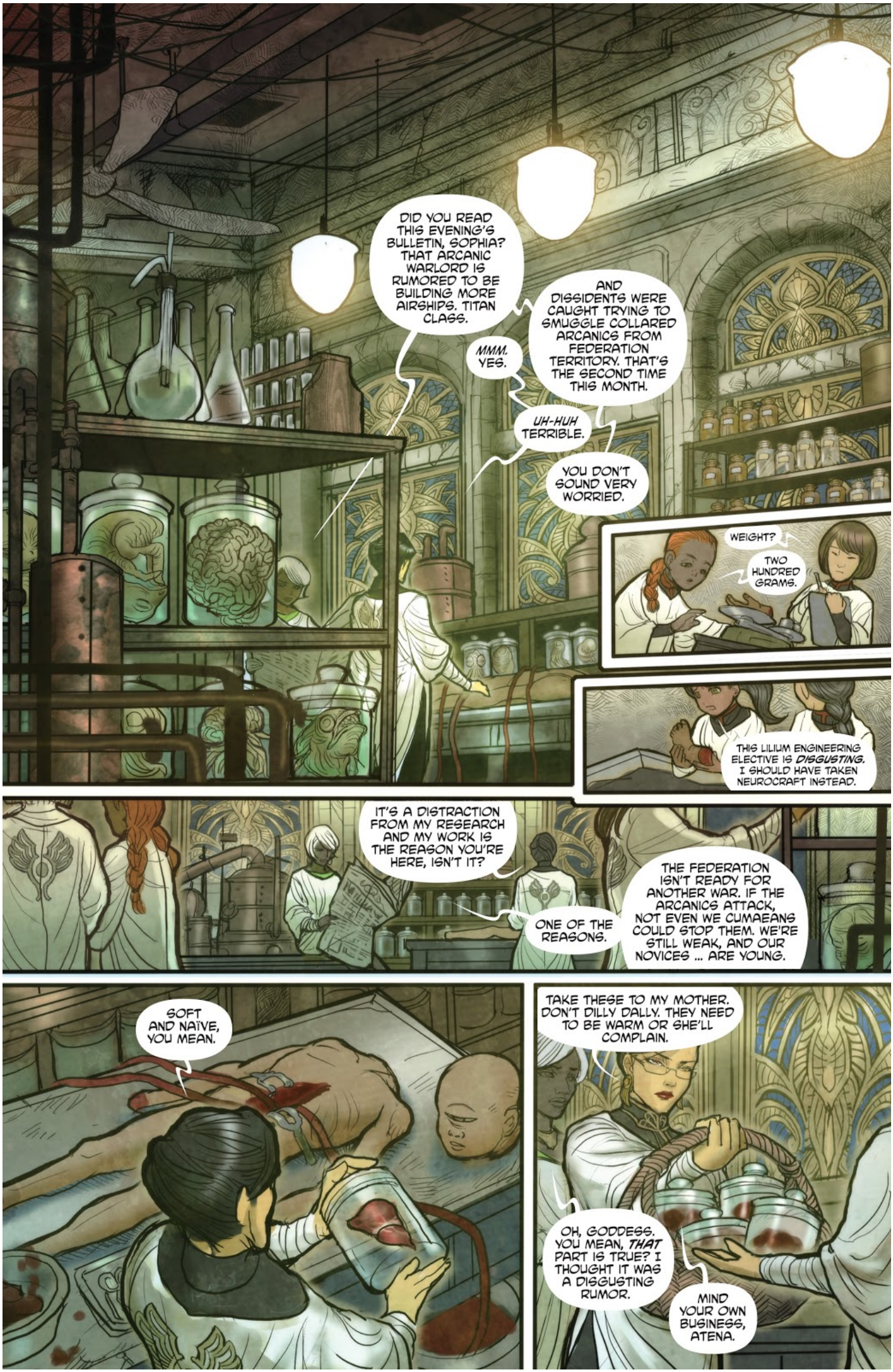
ZZZZ
ZZZZRRRT
AAAAAHHHHH!
KIPPA... DON'T FIGHT THEM...
LET ME GO!
YOU FEEL THAT COLD? LIKE THE TEMPERATURE JUST DROPPED?
DON'T PASS OUT QUITE YET.
I NEED TO KNOW IF YOU'RE STRONG ENOUGH TO TAKE ONE MORE, LITTLE ONE.
...FUCK... YOU...
HMMM? WAS THAT A YES?
ZZZ-ZZZZ
AAAAAHHHH
ZZZZZZZRRTT

AAHHHHH!
WWRRRRNNCCHH
=URRKK=
=HHSSS=


...FINALLY...
OH, G-GODDESS...
WHAT THE HELL?
MY COLLAR... MY COLLAR IS GONE...
SHE KILLED THE BAD WOMAN.
DON'T LOOK, KIPPA.
SHE DID IT WITH HER MIND.
SHE -- SHE SAVED ME.
IT'S A WITCH TRICK.
THE TRICK WHERE THEY RIP OFF OUR CELL DOORS AND KILL THEIR OWN PEOPLE? SHUT UP.
HOW DID SHE DO IT?
HOW DO YOU KNOW IT WAS HER?
IS SHE DEAD?
NOT YET.


YOU ALL... NEED TO LEAVE... RIGHT NOW.
IF YOU DON'T... YOU'RE NOT GETTING OUT.
SOUNDS GOOD TO ME.
FUCK THAT. WE'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A CUMAEA STRONGHOLD. MIGHT AS WELL GO BACK TO OUR CELLS.
YOU GO BACK. I'D RATHER DIE.
WITCHES BUILT... ON TOP OF RUINS. SHOULD BE TUNNELS THAT STILL RUN INTO... OLD CITY. OR SEWERS.
AREN'T YOU COMING WITH US?
I'M NOT... TRYING TO ESCAPE.
COME ON, HURRY.
BUT WHAT ABOUT HER? SHE *SAVED* US.
I DON'T KNOW THAT. AND EVEN IF SHE DID, IF SHE DOESN'T WANT TO LEAVE THERE'S NOTHING TO BE DONE.




DID YOU READ THIS EVENING'S BULLETIN, SOPHIA? THAT ARCANIC WARLORD IS RUMORED TO BE BUILDING MORE AIRSHIPS. TITAN CLASS.
MMM. YES.
AND DISSIDENTS WERE CAUGHT TRYING TO SMUGGLE COLLARED ARCANICS FROM FEDERATION TERRITORY. THAT'S THE SECOND TIME THIS MONTH.
UH-HUH TERRIBLE.
YOU DON'T SOUND VERY WORRIED.
WEIGHT?
TWO HUNDRED GRAMS.
THIS LILIUM ENGINEERING ELECTIVE IS DISGUSTING. I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN NEUROCRAFT INSTEAD.
IT'S A DISTRACTION FROM MY RESEARCH AND MY WORK IS THE REASON YOU'RE HERE, ISN'T IT?
ONE OF THE REASONS.
THE FEDERATION ISN'T READY FOR ANOTHER WAR. IF THE ARCANICS ATTACK, NOT EVEN WE CUMAEANS COULD STOP THEM. WE'RE STILL WEAK, AND OUR NOVICES ... ARE YOUNG.
SOFT AND NAÏVE, YOU MEAN.
TAKE THESE TO MY MOTHER. DON'T DILLY DALLY. THEY NEED TO BE WARM OR SHE'LL COMPLAIN.
OH, GODDESS. YOU MEAN, THAT PART IS TRUE? I THOUGHT IT WAS A DISGUSTING RUMOR.
MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, ATENA.

YOUNG LADIES! FINISH BURYING THOSE RENDERS AND GET OUT. LAB IS DISMISSED FOR THE DAY.
AND YOU... I SUPPOSE IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO EXPLAIN YOUR OTHER REASON FOR BEING HERE.
I'M SURE YOU CAN GUESS. I'M SUPPOSED TO BRING YOU *AND* YOUR MOTHER BACK TO THE COUNCIL.
OF COURSE YOU ARE. AND HOW ARE YOU GOING TO MANAGE THAT?
BY ASKING NICELY.
HA.
ME, THAT'S ONE THING.
BUT MY MOTHER? AS FAR AS THE COUNCIL IS CONCERNED, SHE'S LONG DEAD. FOR GOOD REASON, IN MY OPINION.
WISHFUL THINKING. BUT THEY'RE NOT *THAT* STUPID. IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE WAR BEGINS AGAIN. THEY NEED YOU BOTH. EVEN IF YOUR MOTHER IS... *UNPREDICTABLE.*
FUCK THEM.
SOPHIA, SENDING ME WAS A NICETY. YOU DON'T WANT THEM DISPATCHING AN INQUISITRIX.
I'D FEEL SORRY FOR THE INQUISITRIX.
PLEASE. EITHER YOU COMPEL YOUR MOTHER TO OBEY, OR THE COUNCIL WILL --
SOMETHING'S WRONG.
WE'RE IN DANGER.
MY LADIES!
ARCANICS HAVE ESCAPED FROM ALL HOLDING CELLS IN SECTIONS ONE, TWO, AND THREE.
WE'RE DEALING WITH A FIREFIGHT IN THE LOWER LEVEL. WE WANT ALL CUMAEA UNDER LOCKDOWN FOR THEIR PROTECTION.

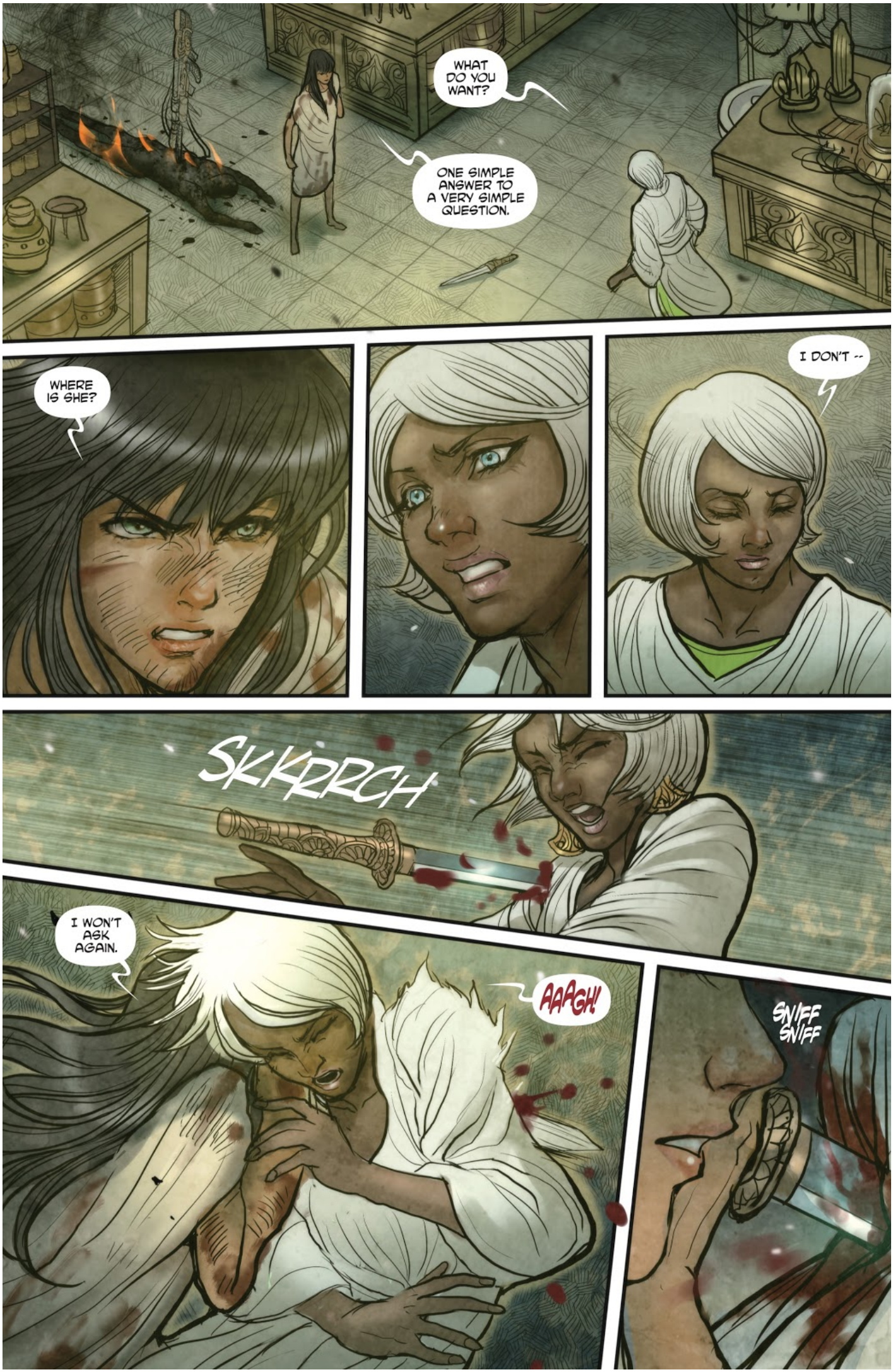
CAN'T YOU FEEL IT? CAN'T YOU HEAR THE SCREAMING?
SOPHIA, FOCUS. TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE. MAYBE WE CAN --
WAIT, WHAT ARE YOU -- DON'T SIPHON --
I'VE FELT THIS BEFORE...
SOPHIA, STOP. THE GUARDS ARE PROTECTING US. WE'RE NOT IN DANGER.
NO, SOPHIA! THE COUNCIL FORBIDS MORPHOSIS!
...I'VE HEARD THOSE SCREAMS...
...IN CONSTANTINE.
STOP IT!
...NOT AGAIN... NOT AGAIN...
PANT PANT
STAY THERE. STAY CALM. I'M... I'M GETTING HELP.
NO! DON'T OPEN --
AAIEEEE!

LADY SOPHIA, YOU AND I NEED TO TALK.
IT WON'T TAKE LONG.
YOU FUCKING ANIMAL.
AIYEEEEE...
WE'RE GOING TO SKIN YOU ALIVE.
...EEEEEEE...
I THINK WE SHOULD NEGOTIATE.
...EEEEEEE...
THUMP

YOU KNOW WHAT? NEVER MIND TALKING.
FWOOSH
IT WAS YOU.
CLICK
IT WAS YOU, WASN'T IT?
I CAN FEEL IT. THAT BRAND ON YOUR –
YES.

AIEEE!
I LIKE YOU BETTER ON FIRE.
YOU CAN'T... KILL ME... THAT EASILY.
DO YOU KNOW... WHO I AM?
A WITCH!
FWOOOSH
WITCHES ALL BURN THE SAME.
NOOOO...
THUD

YOU --
DON'T.
GIVE ME THAT KNIFE.
HOW?
LOOKS LIKE YOUR HAND IS FULL.
BITCH.
PUT IT ON THE GROUND. MOVE TO THE WALL.
SHINK
SOPHIA!


WHAT DO YOU WANT?
ONE SIMPLE ANSWER TO A VERY SIMPLE QUESTION.
WHERE IS SHE?
I DON'T --
SKKRRCH
I WON'T ASK AGAIN.
AAAGH!
SNIFF SNIFF

MISS?
ARE YOU STILL ALIVE IN THERE?
MORE OR LESS.
AACHH!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, LITTLE FOX?
I FOLLOWED YOU.
I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SAFER.
YOU'RE GOOD AT KILLING.
CARRY THOSE WEAPONS FOR ME.

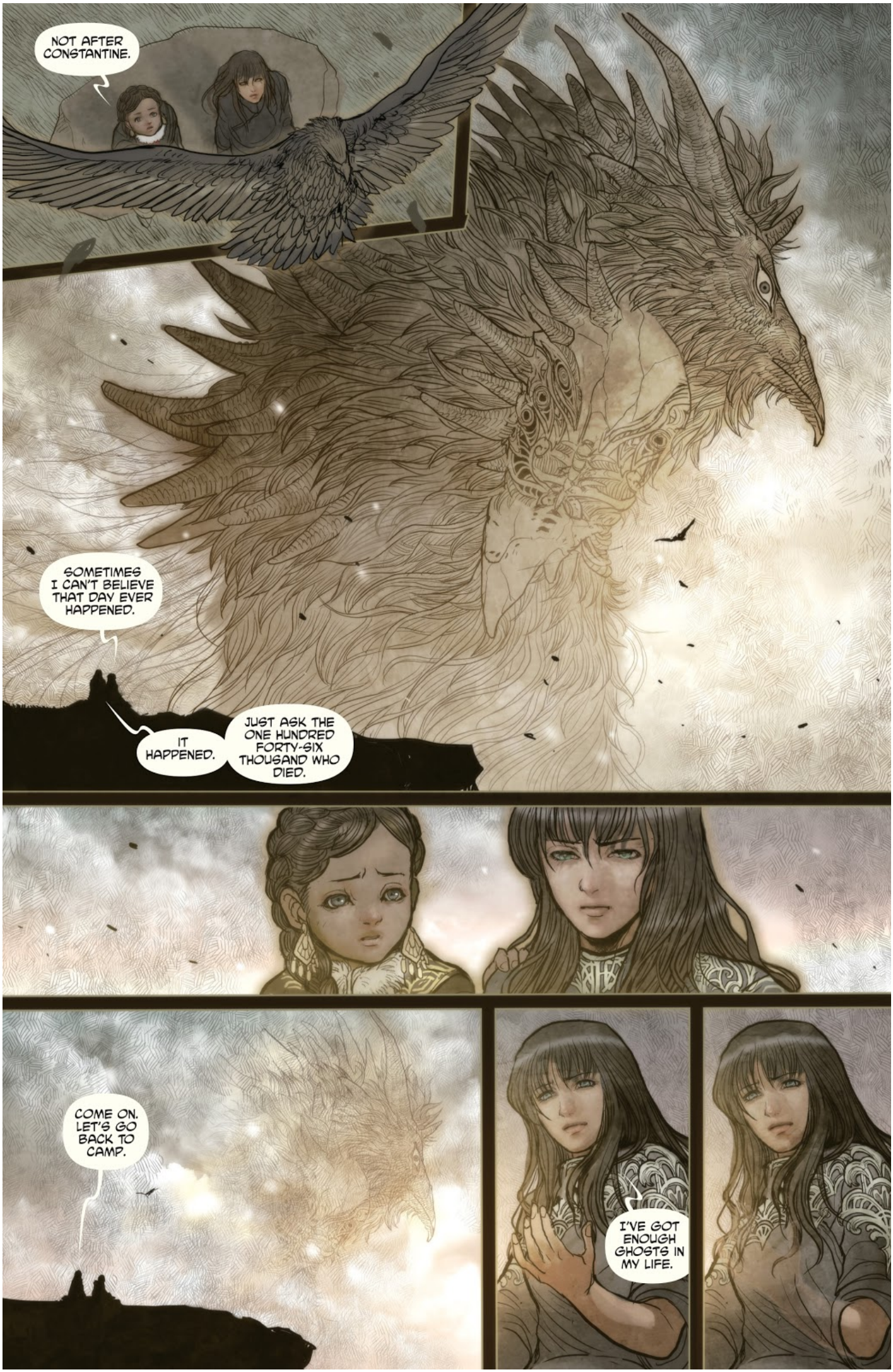
I'M NOT A FOOL.
GUARDS DON'T USUALLY POUR MY TEA AND HOVER OUTSIDE MY DOOR. YOU AND THE OTHERS ACT LIKE HENS BEFORE A CLEAVER.
IT'S NOTHING, MY LADY. A MINOR DISTURBANCE.
THE FULL MOON ALWAYS BRINGS THE WORST OUT OF THE ARCANICS.
VZZ VZZ
THE GODDESS BE DAMNED. MY DAUGHTER MUST BE OUTDOING HERSELF TONIGHT.
OR IS THIS PART OF YOUR LUNAR DISTURBANCE?
PLEASE EXCUSE ME, MY LADY

I NEED TO CHECK WITH THE OTHERS. WHATEVER HAPPENS, I MUST ASK THAT YOU NOT OPEN THE DOOR TO ANYONE BUT US.
DO I EVER?
HMMM.
THUDD
I DIDN'T WANT TO KILL HER...
...BUT SHE INSISTED.
YVETTE LO LIM.
IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME.

I BURIED THAT NAME YEARS AGO. BURIED IT *DEAD.*
I DON'T KNOW YOU.
THEN LOOK HARDER.
MAIKA.
MAIKA HALFWOLF.
NO... I COULD NEVER FORGET YOU...
...OR YOUR MOTHER.

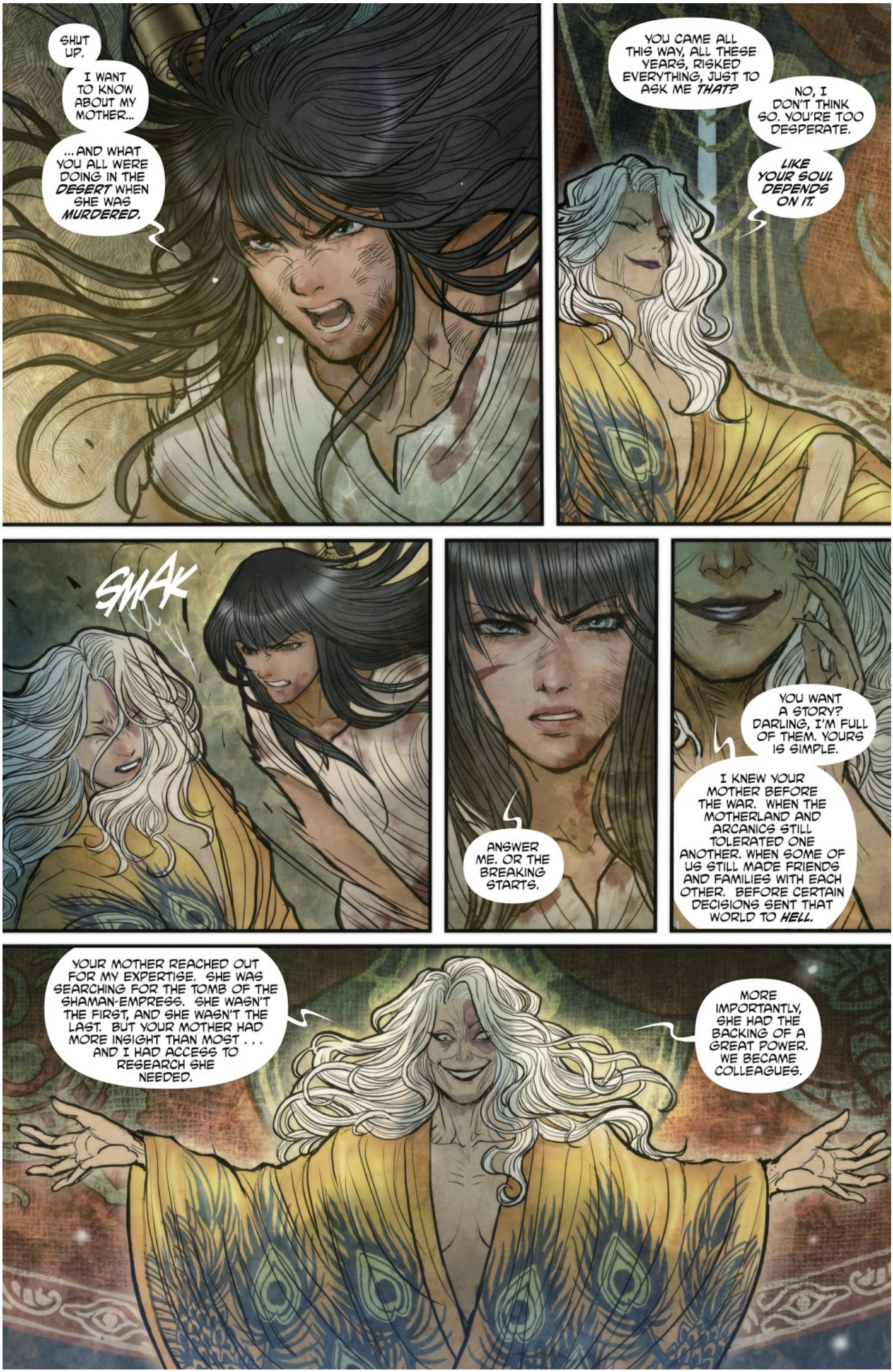
ONE
MONTH
AGO.

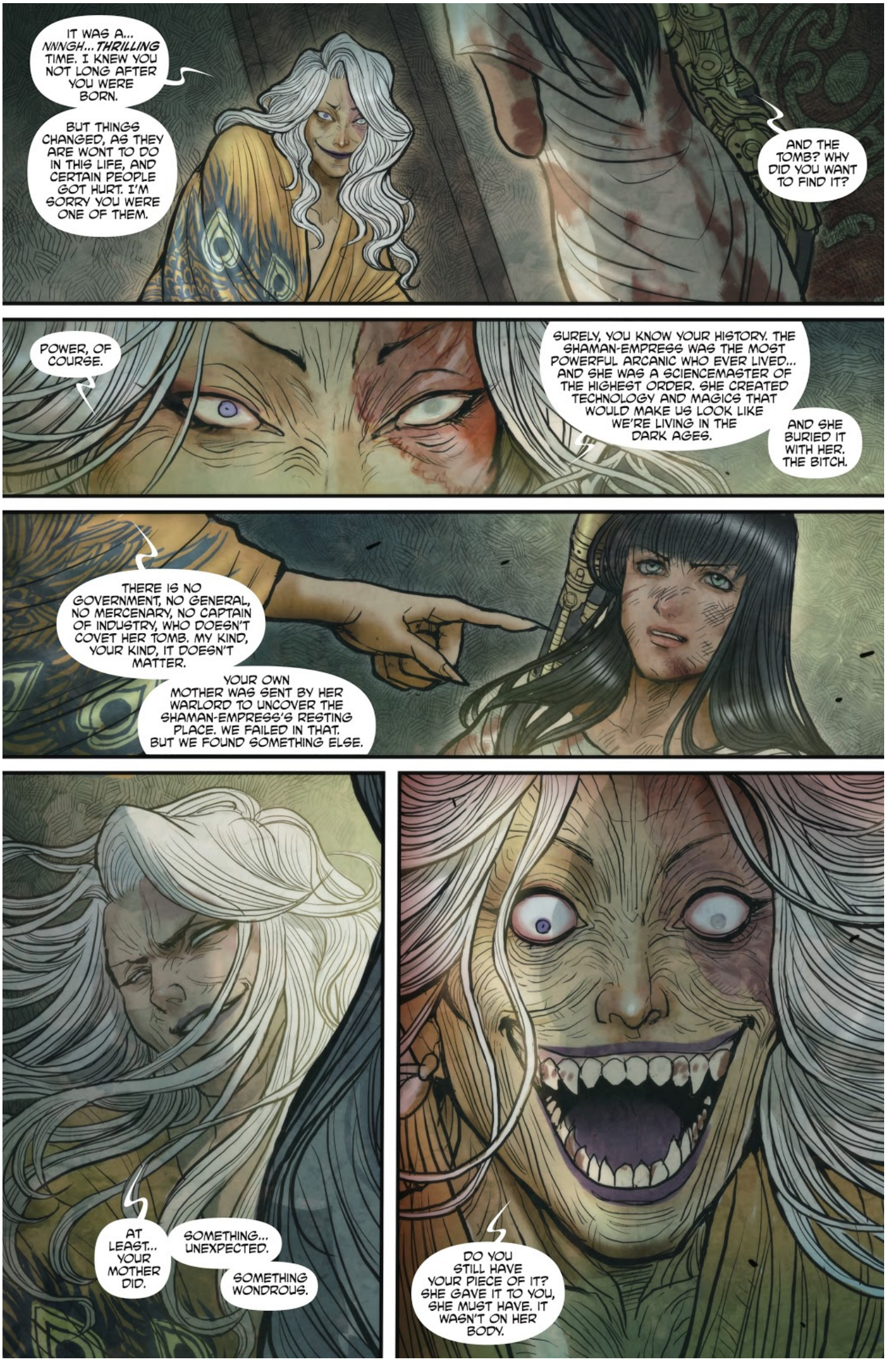
THE PRIESTS SAY THEY'RE THE GHOSTS OF DEAD GODS.
BUT I DON'T BELIEVE THEY'RE GHOSTS.

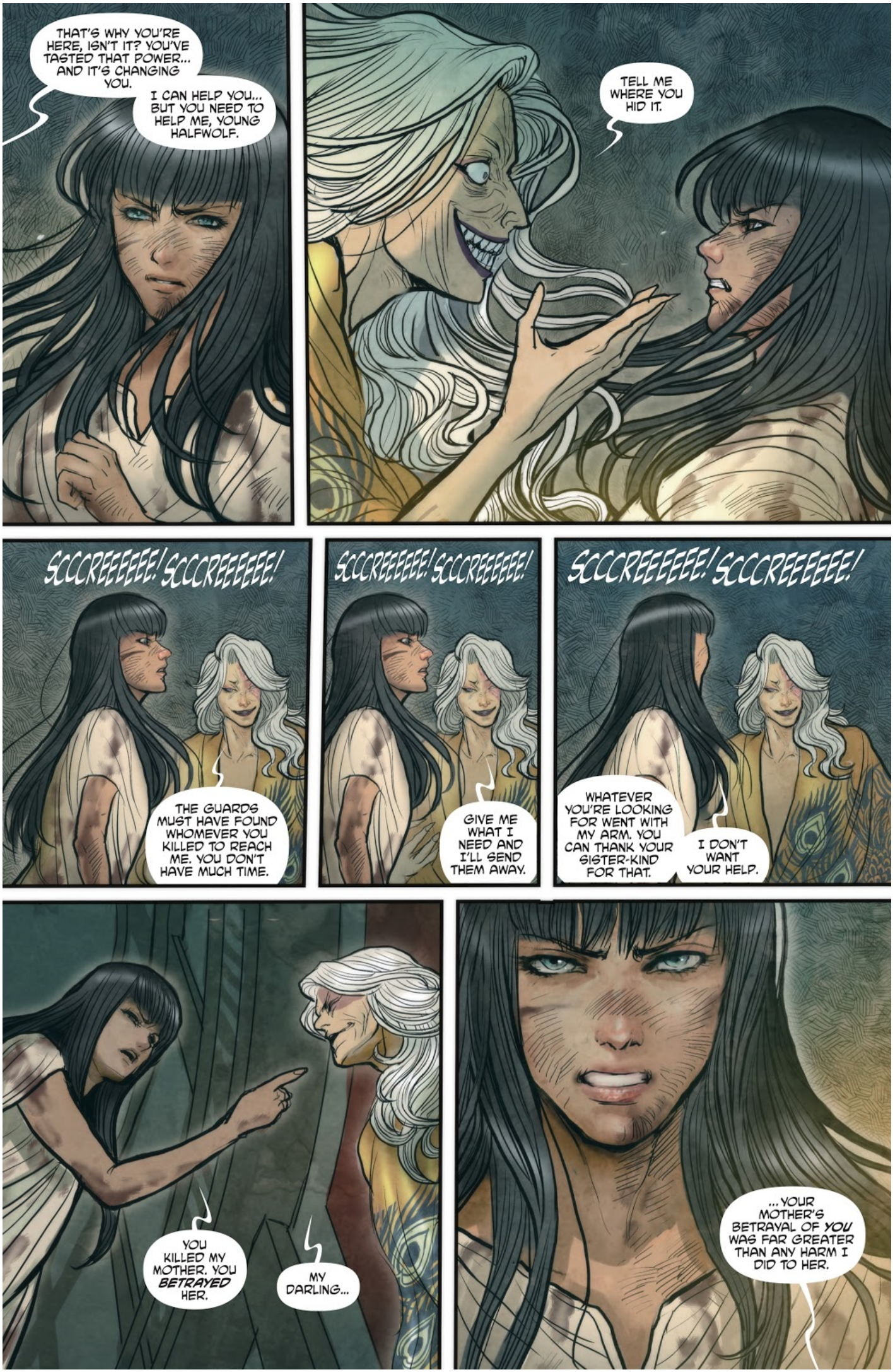

NOT AFTER CONSTANTINE.
SOMETIMES I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT DAY EVER HAPPENED.
IT HAPPENED.
JUST ASK THE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-SIX THOUSAND WHO DIED.
COME ON. LET'S GO BACK TO CAMP.
I'VE GOT ENOUGH GHOSTS IN MY LIFE.

GUESS YOU GOT TIRED OF FIDDLING WITH THAT LOCK.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
"I LOOKED FOR YOU AFTER HER DEATH, MAIKA."

YEARS, I SEARCHED.
YOU SHOULD HAVE SCOURED YOUR OWN SLAVE CAMPS.
AH.
THAT... IS NOT THE FATE I EXPECTED. NOT FOR THE DAUGHTER OF MORIKO HALFWOLF.
DON'T SAY HER NAME!
DO... NNNNGH BE CAREFUL. I'M AN OLD WOMAN. WE BREAK EASILY.
THEN BREAK.
HA.
COME, SIT DOWN. YOU LOOK WEARY, MY CHILD.
HAVE YOU EATEN?
YOU LOOK FAMISHED.

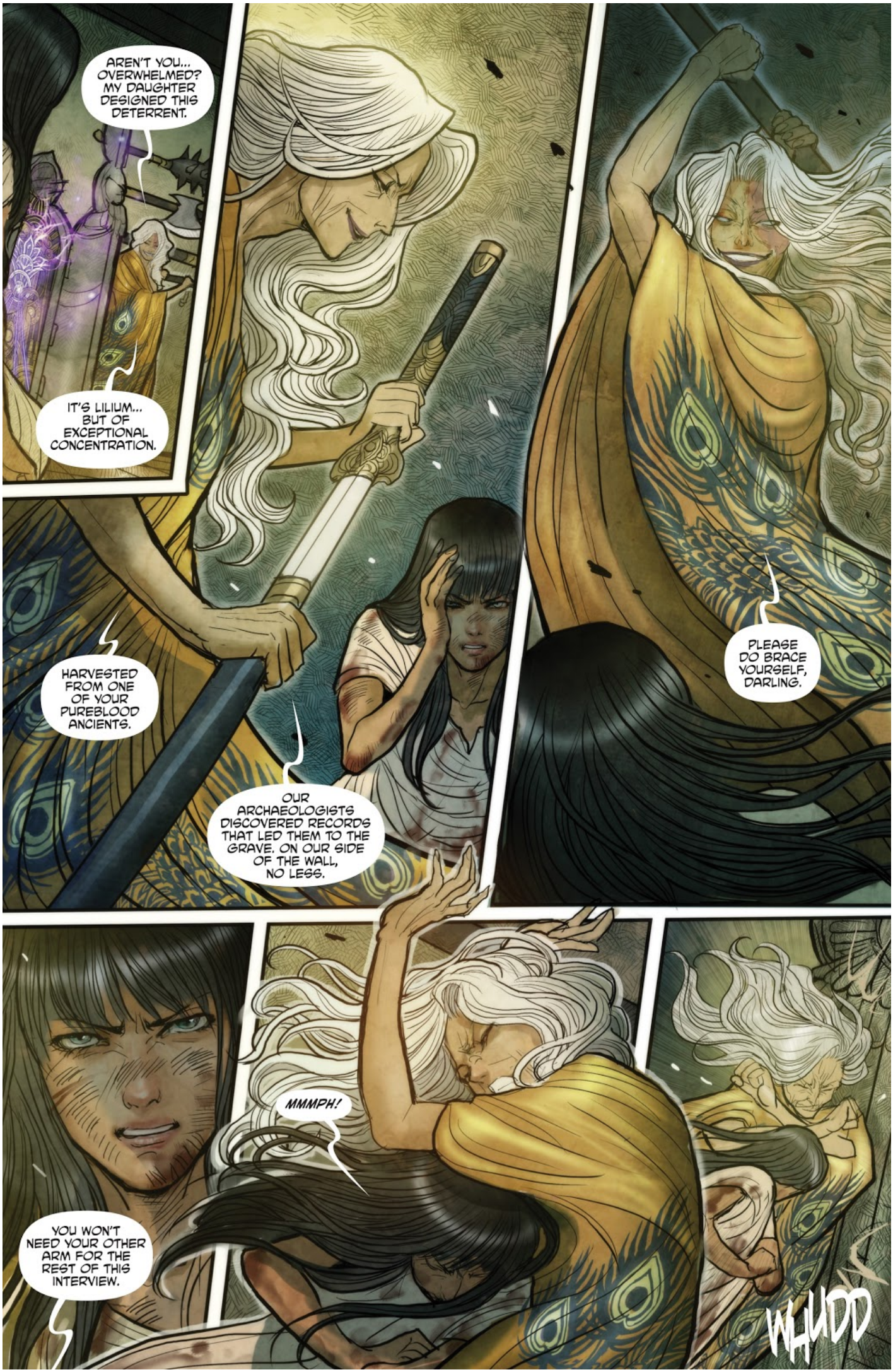

SHUT UP.
I WANT TO KNOW ABOUT MY MOTHER...
...AND WHAT YOU ALL WERE DOING IN THE *DESERT* WHEN SHE WAS *MURDERED.*
YOU CAME ALL THIS WAY, ALL THESE YEARS, RISKED EVERYTHING, JUST TO ASK ME *THAT?*
NO, I DON'T THINK SO. YOU'RE TOO DESPERATE.
LIKE YOUR SOUL DEPENDS ON IT.
SMAK
ANSWER ME. OR THE BREAKING STARTS.
YOU WANT A STORY? DARLING, I'M FULL OF THEM. YOURS IS SIMPLE.
I KNEW YOUR MOTHER BEFORE THE WAR. WHEN THE MOTHERLAND AND ARCANICS STILL TOLERATED ONE ANOTHER. WHEN SOME OF US STILL MADE FRIENDS AND FAMILIES WITH EACH OTHER. BEFORE CERTAIN DECISIONS SENT THAT WORLD TO *HELL.*
YOUR MOTHER REACHED OUT FOR MY EXPERTISE. SHE WAS SEARCHING FOR THE TOMB OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS. SHE WASN'T THE FIRST, AND SHE WASN'T THE LAST. BUT YOUR MOTHER HAD MORE INSIGHT THAN MOST . . . AND I HAD ACCESS TO RESEARCH SHE NEEDED.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHE HAD THE BACKING OF A GREAT POWER. WE BECAME COLLEAGUES.

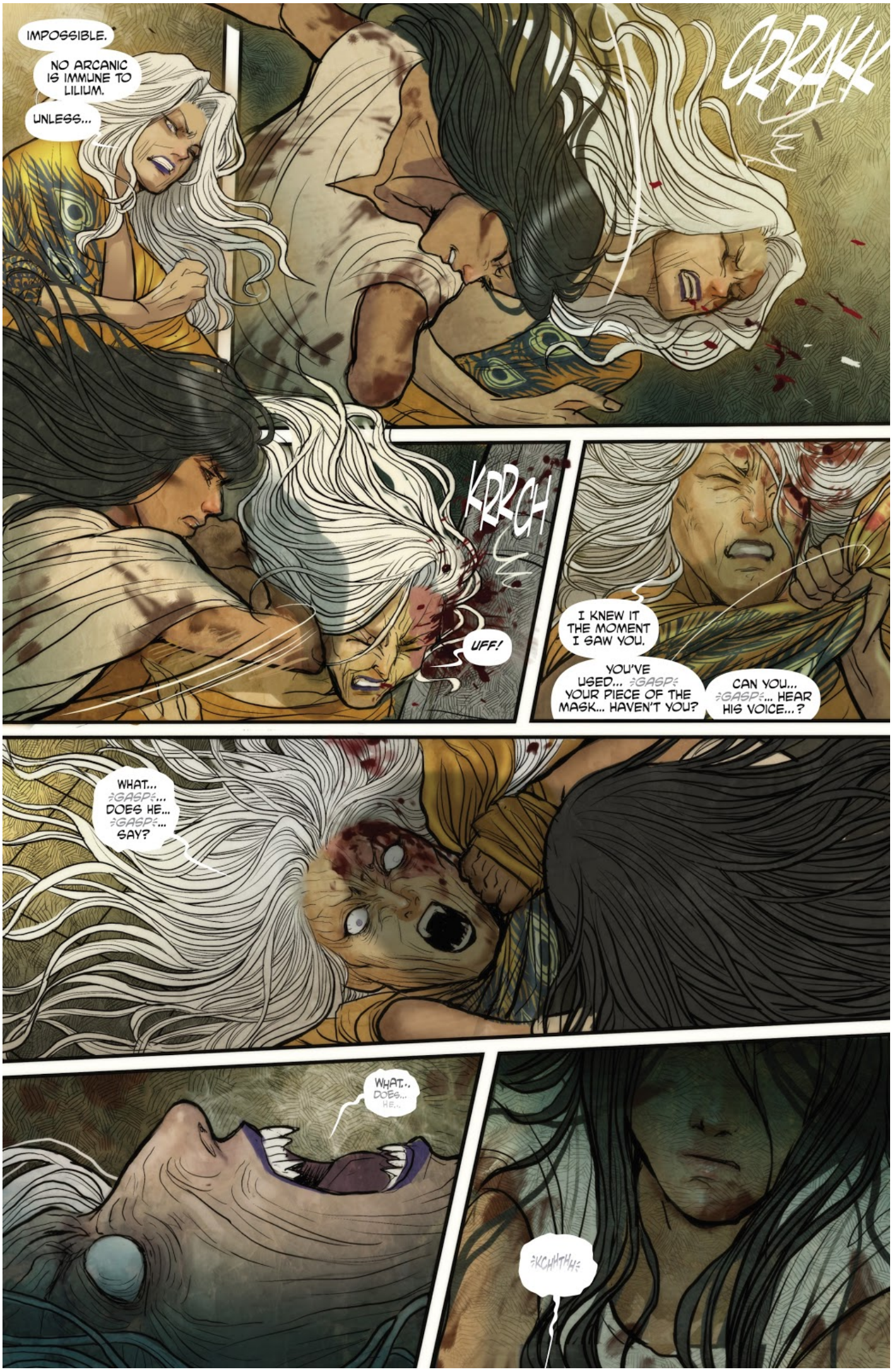

IT WAS A... NNNGH... THRILLING TIME. I KNEW YOU NOT LONG AFTER YOU WERE BORN.
BUT THINGS CHANGED, AS THEY ARE WONT TO DO IN THIS LIFE, AND CERTAIN PEOPLE GOT HURT. I'M SORRY YOU WERE ONE OF THEM.
AND THE TOMB? WHY DID YOU WANT TO FIND IT?
POWER, OF COURSE.
SURELY, YOU KNOW YOUR HISTORY. THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS WAS THE MOST POWERFUL ARCANIC WHO EVER LIVED... AND SHE WAS A SCIENCEMASTER OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. SHE CREATED TECHNOLOGY AND MAGICS THAT WOULD MAKE US LOOK LIKE WE'RE LIVING IN THE DARK AGES.
AND SHE BURIED IT WITH HER. THE BITCH.
THERE IS NO GOVERNMENT, NO GENERAL, NO MERCENARY, NO CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY, WHO DOESN'T COVET HER TOMB. MY KIND, YOUR KIND, IT DOESN'T MATTER.
YOUR OWN MOTHER WAS SENT BY HER WARLORD TO UNCOVER THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S RESTING PLACE. WE FAILED IN THAT. BUT WE FOUND SOMETHING ELSE.
AT LEAST... YOUR MOTHER DID.
SOMETHING... UNEXPECTED.
SOMETHING WONDROUS.
DO YOU STILL HAVE YOUR PIECE OF IT? SHE GAVE IT TO YOU, SHE MUST HAVE. IT WASN'T ON HER BODY.


THAT'S WHY YOU'RE HERE, ISN'T IT? YOU'VE TASTED THAT POWER... AND IT'S CHANGING YOU.
I CAN HELP YOU... BUT YOU NEED TO HELP ME, YOUNG HALFWOLF.
TELL ME WHERE YOU HID IT.
SCCCREEEEEE! SCCCREEEEEE!
THE GUARDS MUST HAVE FOUND WHOMEVER YOU KILLED TO REACH ME. YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME.
SCCCREEEEEE! SCCCREEEEEE!
GIVE ME WHAT I NEED AND I'LL SEND THEM AWAY.
SCCCREEEEEE! SCCCREEEEEE!
WHATEVER YOU'RE LOOKING FOR WENT WITH MY ARM. YOU CAN THANK YOUR SISTER-KIND FOR THAT.
I DON'T WANT YOUR HELP.
YOU KILLED MY MOTHER. YOU BETRAYED HER.
MY DARLING...
...YOUR MOTHER'S BETRAYAL OF YOU WAS FAR GREATER THAN ANY HARM I DID TO HER.

MISS?
SUCH A CONFUSED YOUNG WOMAN.
LET ME SHOW YOU SOMETHING THAT WILL ANSWER AT LEAST ONE OF YOUR QUESTIONS...
...AND MAYBE MINE, AS WELL.
COME AND SEE WHAT YOUR MOTHER FOUND.
SOMEONE'S IN THERE. I CAN HEAR BREATHING.
OH..

NO... NO, NO. PLEASE DON'T HURT ME. PLEASE DON'T EAT ANY MORE OF ME. I'LL BE GOOD, I'LL BE SO GOOD I PROMISE... JUST DON'T TAKE ANY MORE...
WHINER.
WHAT DOES *HE* HAVE TO DO WITH MY MOTHER?
HIM? NOTHING AT ALL.
UNLESS YOU NEED A *SNACK.*
NNNNGH.
YVETTE...

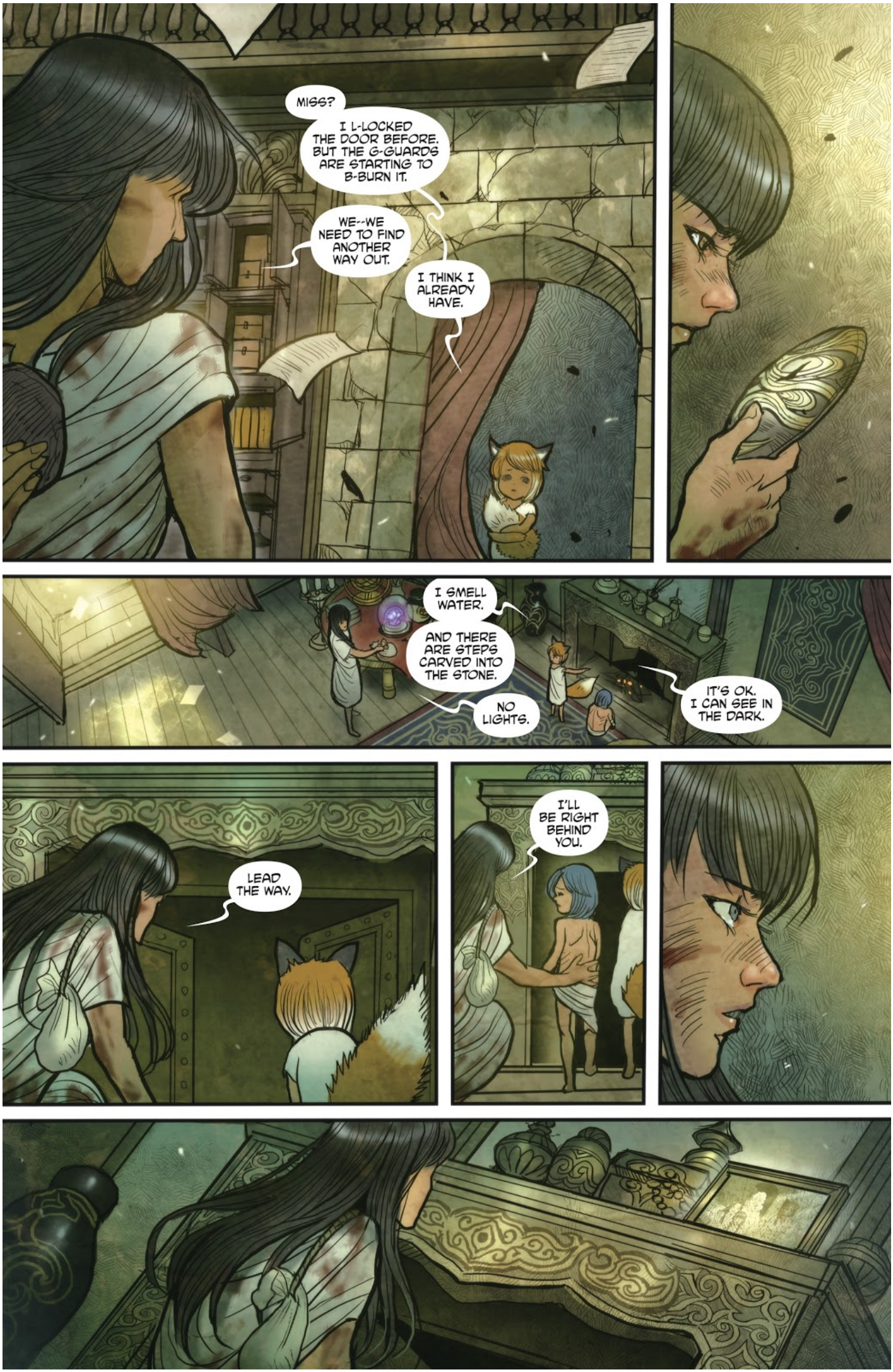

AREN'T YOU... OVERWHELMED? MY DAUGHTER DESIGNED THIS DETERRENT.
IT'S LILIUM... BUT OF EXCEPTIONAL CONCENTRATION.
HARVESTED FROM ONE OF YOUR PUREBLOOD ANCIENTS.
OUR ARCHAEOLOGISTS DISCOVERED RECORDS THAT LED THEM TO THE GRAVE. ON OUR SIDE OF THE WALL, NO LESS.
PLEASE DO BRACE YOURSELF, DARLING.
MMMPH!
YOU WON'T NEED YOUR OTHER ARM FOR THE REST OF THIS INTERVIEW.
WHUDD

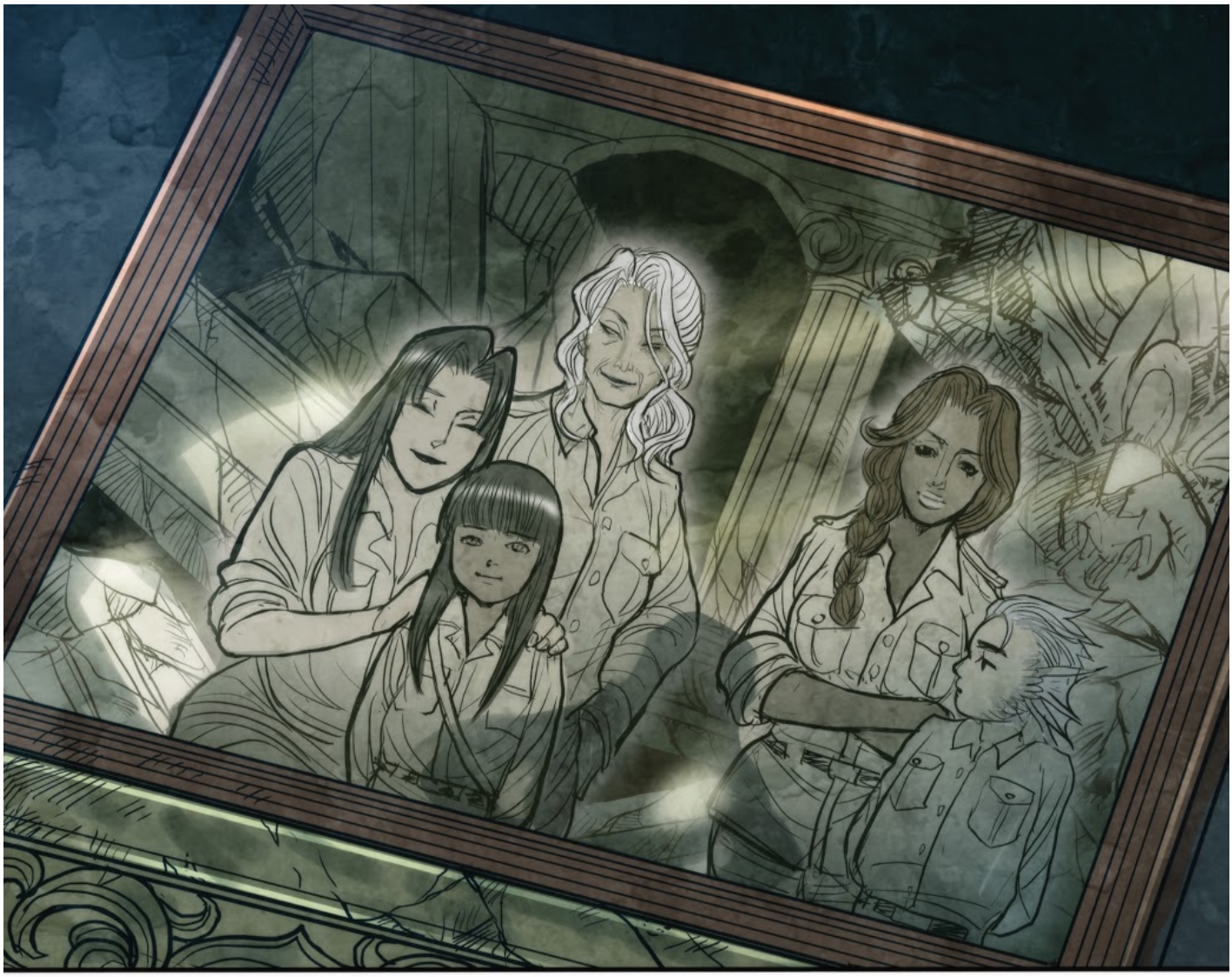

IMPOSSIBLE.
NO ARCANIC IS IMMUNE TO LILIUM.
UNLESS...
CRRAK
KRRCH
UFF!
I KNEW IT THE MOMENT I SAW YOU.
YOU'VE USED... ÷GASP÷ YOUR PIECE OF THE MASK... HAVEN'T YOU?
CAN YOU... ÷GASP÷... HEAR HIS VOICE...?
WHAT... ÷GASP÷... DOES HE... ÷GASP÷... SAY?
WHAT... DOES... HE...
÷KCHHTH÷

ZZZZZZZ
ZZZZZZZ
ZZZZZZ
YAHH!
ZZZRAKT
ZZZRRT
RRWWWNNGH!
COME ON, STAND UP.
NO.
IS IT OVER?

WE NEED TO FIND A WAY OU --
OPEN.
NO. NO, NO, NO.
NOT THAT VOICE.
WHAT...
DON'T LOOK AT IT.

STAY HERE WITH HIM.


MISS?
I L-LOCKED THE DOOR BEFORE. BUT THE G-GUARDS ARE STARTING TO B-BURN IT.
WE--WE NEED TO FIND ANOTHER WAY OUT.
I THINK I ALREADY HAVE.
I SMELL WATER.
AND THERE ARE STEPS CARVED INTO THE STONE.
NO LIGHTS.
IT'S OK. I CAN SEE IN THE DARK.
LEAD THE WAY.
I'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU.



FUCK.
MISS!

WE HAVE TO HURRY! I CAN HEAR THEM!
WE'RE CLOSE... WE'RE CLOSE TO WHERE MY FRIENDS --
RRNNN!

MISS!
YAHH!
NNNGGGH!
ARE YOU OKAY? MISS?
IT'S... IT'S NOTHING.
GIRL. COME HERE.
I NEED YOU.

YOU WHAT?
DON'T GO NEAR HER.
RUN!
NO! WAIT!
EEP!
WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?
NOTHING IS WRONG, GIRL...
I JUST... HUNGER.
AIEEE!

RUN...
DON'T... COME NEAR ME...
UNNN!
I'M NOT... NOT A MONSTER...
NO... NO I'M NOT...
TUYA... HELP...

HELP...
...ME...
TO QUOTE THE POETS...
WE'RE FUCKED.

MONSTRESS was more a desire than an idea. An impulse that came over me, something I'd think about in the shower or when I was driving and listening to Janet Jackson on the radio. I had this image in my head of a battered girl standing alone, absolutely furious, and behind her a battlefield that stretched for miles. I didn't know what to do with it – and I'm not all that patient – but I had no choice in this matter. Nothing was there. No story. Just that girl.

I don't know anything about war, not having lived through one. But my grandparents experienced the devastation of war firsthand in China. In their stories surviving was more horrifying than dying. Surviving required a desire to live more powerful than any bomb or army, a summoning of superhuman resilience to keep going, day after day. Starvation, biological experimentation, rape camps, occupation, colonization – what ravaged Europe during WWII, also ravaged China and the rest of Asia. And the victims of this horror had to learn how to first survive...and then survive the surviving.

To be Chinese-American meant the war loomed upon the history of my world. I grew up hearing my grandparents tell nightmarish stories. Heartbreaking, too. And also heroic beyond words. What they endured I could scarcely imagine. I thought, always: If I could only be as strong as them.

My grandparents were chouchun. I'm a twig in comparison. That's okay. My imagination is strong. And the root of my desire, I finally realized, was to tell a story about what it means to be a survivor. A survivor, not just of a cataclysmic war, but of racial conflict and its antecedent: hatred. And to confront the question: how does one whom history has made a monster, escape her monstrosity? How does one overcome the monstrousness of others without succumbing to a rising monstrousness within?

The image of that furious girl never left me. She followed me from Beijing to Boston and to Japan, where Sana and I first began our collaboration and where that girl finally began to speak. And here we are – and here you are.

And here she is too.

Sana and I thank you, deeply, for partaking in the epic journey of this haunted young woman who believes she's alone, with a war far behind her – and another one, rising, like a doom, like a monster, on the horizon.

I like to think my grandparents would have recognized her.

Much love,
Marjorie Liu

Thank you so much for picking up MONSTRESS!

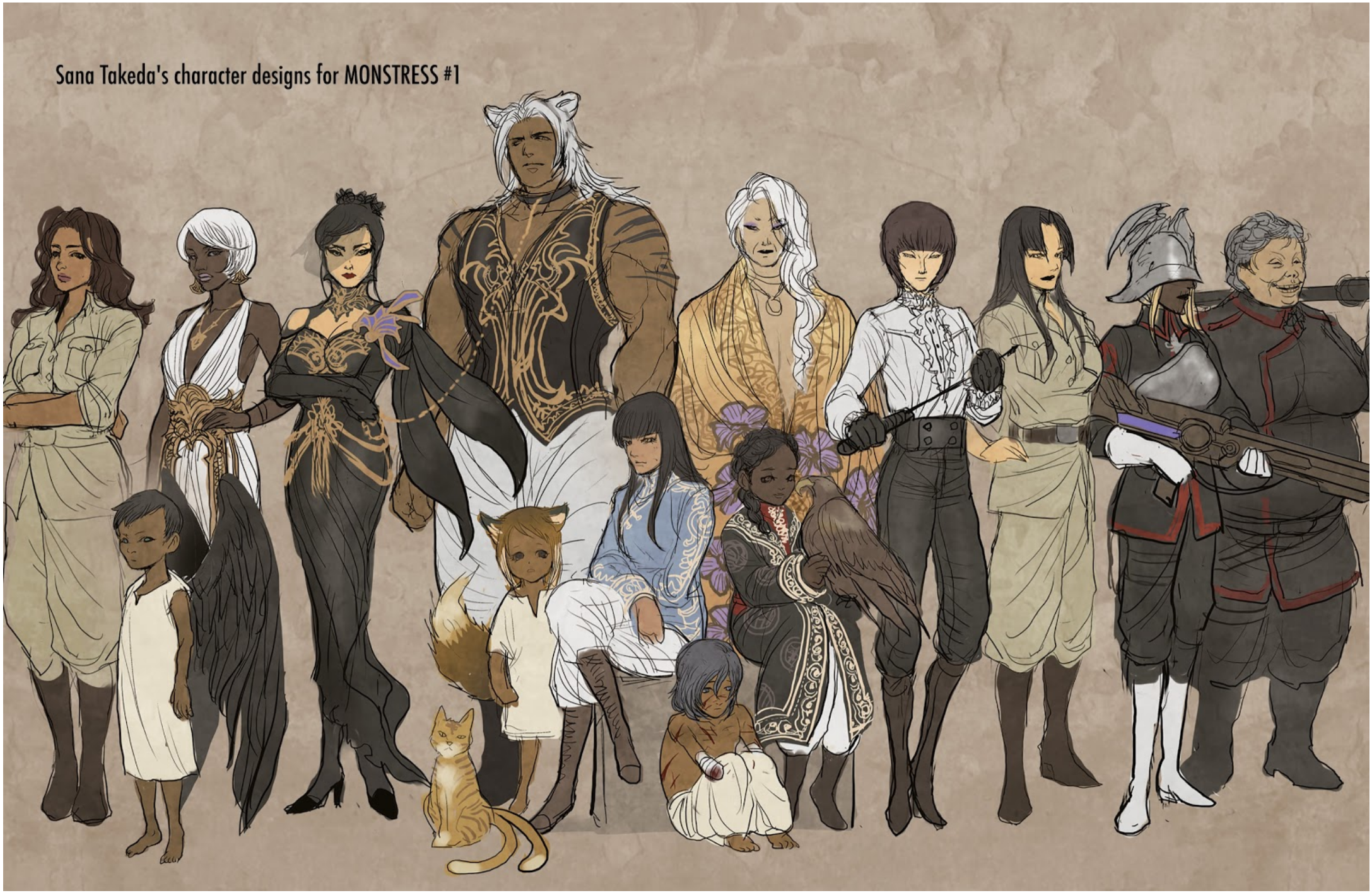
It would be a great honor if the world that Maika sees gave a little spice in your life.

Hoping that your inner "monster" will never wake up.

Best wishes,
Sana Takeda

We love hearing from readers! Send all your letters and fan art to monstress.comic@gmail.com!
#Monstress for Twitter and Instagram!

Sana Takeda's character designs for MONSTRESS #1



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